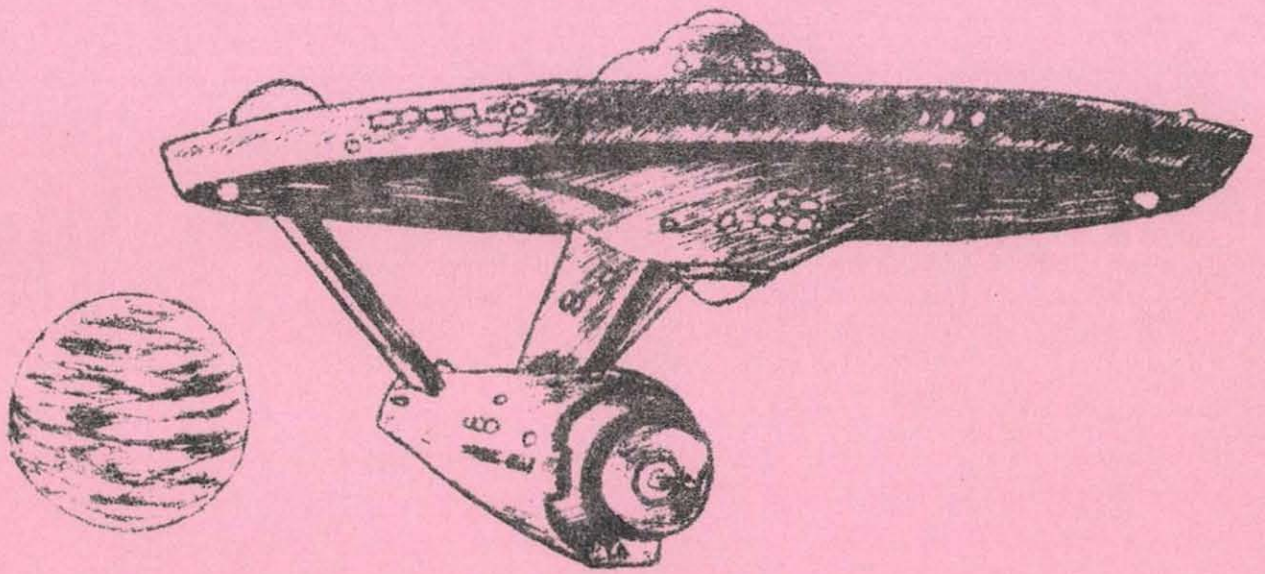


ScoTpress

ENTERPRISE -



PERSONAL LOG 2

a STAR TREK
fanzine

- contents -

Chance Meeting	Vicki Richards	P 1
Heavenly Fire	Karen Hayden	P 7
Reunion	Lorraine Goodison	P 8
The Plains of Brotherhood	Karen Hayden	P 11
Hitch-hiker	Janette Burton	P 12
Rank Hath its Privileges	J. Patterson	P 16
Willing Sacrifice	Karen Hayden	P 17
No Doctor...Merely Interesting	Doreen DaBinett	P 19
Amor, Ergo Sum	Meg Wright	P 32
The Place of Challenge	Sheryl Peterson	P 33
The Everlasting Dream	Karen Hayden	P 34
Golden Soul	Karen Hayden	P 35
The Demon in the Desert	Sheila Clark	P 36
Alpha Male	Meg Wright	P 44
Love's Prayer	Ann Smith	P 52
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CHANCE MEETING by Vicki Richards

It was a summer's night, sultry and hot. Eleanor Davies drove home to her parents' farm on the outskirts of a remote Welsh village through the deepening shadows. She had been visiting a friend in the nearest large town, some twenty miles away, and had stayed later than intended; it was past eleven, and she still had five miles to go. The lonely, narrow road through the hills was starlit, though, and the night very clear; and although she was anxious to get home, still she was enjoying the drive and the nighttime scenery, and positively refused to hurry too much, preferring to travel along quietly, thinking her own thoughts, and humming softly to herself as she went.

She thought as she drove of the recent reports of UFO activity in the area; a subject close to her heart. It was inconceivable to her to doubt the presence of intelligent beings other than humankind in the galaxy; it just wasn't logical to doubt their existence, she thought to herself; deliberately choosing the favourite word of one of the favourite people in her thoughts, and smiling to herself at her own choice. No, she thought, it is impossible we are alone; they are out there somewhere, and one day they'll make contact with us, and then maybe the universe of Star Trek, or something very near to it, really will exist. Or maybe it does already, and we're not part of it, because our extra-terrestrial counterparts think we're not worthy of belonging yet. And maybe we'll never learn enough for them to think we are.

But firmly she pushed such pessimistic thoughts away, and continued homeward, determined to be more optimistic about the Terran race, glancing at the bright stars from time to time, knowing in her soul that the only reason she hadn't seen one of the UFOs herself was because she hadn't been in the right place at the right time. And even if they were there, at that very moment, she wouldn't be able to see them because they'd no doubt have their deflector screens up if she was looking their way! But she would dearly love to see one with her own eyes, and one day she would, she was sure of it.

She turned the last corner before home, and drove up to the farmhouse. Parking her car, she got out and walked to the farmhouse door, stopping on the threshold to gaze once more at the night sky.

I wonder, when they do come, where it will be from? she asked herself, not for the first time, and where is Eridani anyway? I really must get some star charts and find out. How stupid not knowing where Vulcan's supposed to be - call myself a Trekker!

Dissatisfied with herself, and the incommunicative heavens, she turned and entered the farmhouse. Had she lingered but thirty seconds longer, she would have discovered the truth of her suspicions that she was never in the right place at the right time, for no sooner had she gone in, than a brightly glowing light appeared above one of the nearby hills. Silently it hung there for several moments, then at incredible speed it moved off to the west. After another few seconds it appeared to simply wink out, leaving only the tranquil, ordinary night scene there had been before.

Two days later, it was Saturday. Eleanor got up early, determined to carry out a plan she had been formulating ever since reading the Friday morning papers. She had been disappointed, fed up and furious with herself for not watching the sky a little longer on the Thursday night. If the reports were right, most of the local UFO sightings had been close by; very close. So, partly because she was cross with herself, and partly because she had a curiosity which would not be satisfied by anything other than a look at the area where the UFO was supposed to have been seen, she put on her fell boots, took a packed lunch, and announced she was going to spend the day walking in the hills; a circumstance that nobody would find unusual.

Within a short while she had left the road, taking the narrow tracks over

the hills that she had known and used since childhood, enjoying the exercise, but impatient to arrive at her destination.

It did not take Eleanor long to reach that place; a hollow in the hills over which the UFO had been reported to have been hovering at the moment it had disappeared. Several people had reported sightings, but the nearest witness had been a farmer whom Eleanor knew, who had been out on the hills collecting some of his sheep on the Thursday night, and who knew the area too well to make a mistake as to the location. Eleanor had to smile to herself; people seemed to be so much more willing to let it be known that they had seen a UFO these days; and the people they let it be known to seemed to take the reports far more seriously than they would have done even a few years ago. She wondered to herself if maybe the human race was actually beginning to learn some wisdom at long last. A few members of it, anyway.

Pausing on a hilltop, she stood and looked into that valley, disappointed, though not really surprised, that there was no shining grey spacecraft there for her to walk up to - she had often wondered if she would really have the courage if she ever managed to encounter one. But the valley was wooded, and there were plenty of places for a spacecraft to be hidden; not that resourceful aliens would be likely to need trees to conceal them; they no doubt would have force-fields and other technological tools to aid them. But Eleanor wasn't going to turn around and go home without at least having a look at the valley bottom now she had come this far. At a steady pace, she began to descend the green hillside, making short work of the climb down into the valley below.

Quietly she walked through the valley, alongside a small stream; but then she left it, and entered under the shadow of the trees, having decided that if she was going to search the valley, she might as well do it properly.

For several minutes she walked through the woods, walking soundlessly, aware of the silence around her. But then the awareness came to her that the lonely valley was not as deserted as she had thought; coming to her through the trees was the definite sound of someone's footsteps.

But although the hills and valleys were lonely places, it was not altogether unexpected to meet another lone fell-walker, and Eleanor strode forward, thinking only that if there were other people walking about, her chances of seeing any UFO activity were greatly diminished; any aliens would no doubt be hiding themselves away very carefully, or have left the area completely.

So when Eleanor stepped quietly out into a clearing, she was far more unprepared for what she saw than she might have been only a few minutes previously. The footsteps she had heard had been made by a tall man dressed in red, who now stood facing her across the clearing, with an expression on his face that said he was not too surprised to see her. He looked like a man, but she could see instantly that he was no man of her world; his bright blue eyes and high forehead were human-looking enough - but different enough for her to see that here, at last, she had seen more than a UFO; Eleanor Davies had met an alien.

Often she had wondered what she would really do if she ever found herself in such a situation; but strangely, and gratifyingly, she felt no inclination to turn and run; only a growing sense of wonder and curiosity.

She opened her mouth to speak, not knowing what to say, and not knowing if he would understand what she did say; then she closed it again without saying anything. Out of the corner of her eye she had seen a sight which made her eyes open in astonishment, even more than the sight of the first alien had done; about twenty yards behind the alien, who still stood regarding her quietly, she had noticed a large silver shape partly hidden by the trees. And walking from what could only be the spacecraft she had originally come looking for, coming towards the spot where she stood facing the curious alien, was yet another tall humanoid figure. But it was not the fact that the appearance of the second alien was different from that of the first that made her stare, unable for the moment to say anything; it was the fact that his appearance was familiar to her.

The second alien who strode purposefully forward, clad in an outfit of dark blue, had the dark hair, upswept eyebrows and pointed ears of a race she had thought to be only a fictional invention, and the astounding discovery that it was a reality filled her with amazement, and a sensation akin to delight, strangely lacking fear.

The second alien was a Vulcan.

Quickly he approached and stood at the side of the first alien, looking at her calmly. Then he spoke to his companion, and although she didn't know if he was inexplicably speaking her language or if they were using some kind of device to translate, she found she could understand him.

"Interesting," said the Vulcan.

"Interesting?" Eleanor questioned, not really knowing what to say, and surprised she had even managed to get that much out. She couldn't believe what she had heard.

"Yes," replied the Vulcan, addressing her directly this time instead of his companion. "You did not run away. You are curious, and not afraid. Good."

The Vulcan did not smile, but knowing what she did of Vulcans, even if only of the fictional type, she would not have expected him to. But his alien companion did smile, and suddenly Eleanor found she had relaxed. And at the back of her mind she found herself thinking how odd it was - talking to these aliens seemed hardly any different from talking to anyone else for the first time, and she wondered why she had thought it would be.

"Do people usually run away when they encounter you?" Eleanor asked politely. Somehow her tongue seemed able to work again.

"Quite frequently," replied the first alien. He had a marked accent, although his English was quite good. The Vulcan had sounded exactly as she would have expected a Vulcan to sound. Again she found herself wondering.

"Humans do not run away as frequently as they once did, and they more often display curiosity and friendship. That is a good sign. At one time it was usual for your kind to offer us violence." The Vulcan seemed gratified that she was neither afraid nor suspicious. Then the thought struck her that they hadn't seemed too surprised to see her; they had been...expectant, almost. She never knew quite why she asked the next question.

"Is that why you're here? To meet humans and see how they react?"

"In part, yes. I am surprised by your perception," said the Vulcan. "But part of our mission, the most important part, is to attempt to prepare Terrans for the day when we will make contact openly with your world."

Suddenly the enormity of what she was experiencing dawned on Eleanor. And the realisation seemed to free her tongue in a flood of questions which she knew ought to have been the first ones she asked.

"But who are you, anyway - and where are you from? Which planets, I mean; and what do you call yourselves? I can see you are different - from different worlds. Is there some kind of interplanetary federation you belong to?"

The first alien regarded her in a manner which seemed somewhat amused, though in a kindly way. He turned sideways and looked at his companion expectantly, clearly quite willing to allow the Vulcan to do most of the talking.

The Vulcan himself seemed to look right through her, his dark eyes seeming to be trying to reach her thoughts, as if he was as perceptive as Spock, as if the similarity between the alien she now faced and the Vulcan of Star Trek stretched even to their limited telepathic powers.

"We do belong to such a federation, yes," he replied carefully, "but I fear my name would be unpronounceable to you. That, and the name of my companion and his planet of origin, is not of prime interest to me at this moment. What is,

is the name you would put to me if asked. Of which race would you say I was a member?"

This was crazy. But there was a meaning she hadn't yet grasped in his question; she realised that, and she also realised that up to that moment, she had somehow ignored the fact that although this alien was so very alike in appearance to the Vulcans of Star Trek, in all probability that was just chance, and they were called something else entirely, and had no further similarities at all. But the alien seemed to expect her to know from which world he came. It didn't make sense. Or did it?

But she said it just the same.

"You're a Vulcan."

Apparently, this answer was the correct one, as unbelievable as that was. Both of the aliens looked satisfied, and the one who was not a Vulcan emitted something which sounded like a small sigh of relief.

"Yes," came the quiet reply. "You are correct. I am a Vulcan. It appears our experiment is working."

"Experiment? What experiment?" The only possible answer to this strange situation had just come leaping into Eleanor's mind, and as odd as it was, it was no odder than the circumstances in which she found herself at that moment.

"I believe it will be safe to tell you," said the Vulcan, "although you will be the first Terran to which a full explanation has been given. We have been seen, we and other landing parties over the past few decades, by many of your kind. To some we have spoken a little, though guardedly; most have fled before we had the opportunity, and others, especially in the early days, attempted to do us harm, though unsuccessfully. Of course, most of our missions were carried out in great secrecy. It is only now, now that the people of Earth appear to be finally accepting that it is unlikely that they are alone in the galaxy, that we feel the time is right for us - slowly - to begin revealing ourselves to humankind."

"You think we're ready?" Eleanor queried. "I know a great many of us are, but a great many aren't." Concern for her world suddenly replaced her other feelings.

"You speak wisely," replied the Vulcan, "but though we do not believe in interfering with the natural development of other worlds, Earth is at a most critical stage. After much thought and discussion, it was decided by our federation that it was time we gave some assistance."

"You mean help us to live peacefully?"

"Yes, and that was the original reason for our experiment."

Eleanor waited expectantly. He had said he would explain, and somehow she had the feeling that what he was going to tell her was going to be more amazing than all her other experiences that day put together. When he did speak, she was not disappointed.

"Several years ago," began the Vulcan, while his companion looked silently on, "in fact, several decades ago, members from federation worlds most closely resembling Terrans were sent to live on Earth, to actually join Earth society, without anyone from Earth suspecting, in an attempt to learn as much about your planet as possible without causing anyone to panic. At the time, that would have been the most likely result of any open contact between any of us and your world. Over the years it was discovered that, mainly through the field of what you call 'science fiction', which we term as logical speculation on future developments, the people of Earth, at least those gifted with vision, were becoming more and more aware of the possibility of life on other planets. This is always a good sign in the development of any society; 'science fiction' has preceded greater awareness in the societies of many other worlds throughout the galaxy. But our agents on Earth began to feel that the process was too slow."

"So you decided to lend a hand?" Eleanor interrupted, although once more she found it difficult to speak. She just knew what he was going to tell her, improbable as it seemed, and she could hardly get the words out for a growing sense of excitement.

This time he didn't bother to tell her how perceptive she was; he merely nodded his head and continued.

"You are correct in your assumption," he told her. "And from your knowledge of my racial identity, it is apparent that you are familiar with one of your television programmes, which you call 'Star Trek'. From your attitude towards us, I will go so far as to assume that you are what is known as a 'fan'?" He paused for her to deny or confirm that she was.

Eleanor just nodded, dumbfounded, hardly able to believe what she was hearing. Yet it began to make so much sense.

The Vulcan nodded again. "Good. That will make my explanation easier. When it was decided that the people of Earth needed some help to progress, mainly because we felt circumstances here warranted our taking the unusual step of interfering in a planet's development, in order that we might make open contact with Earth sooner than would otherwise be the case so that the federation would be able to help humankind to grow, hopefully to end conflict on your world. When we decided progress was too slow, we knew that the medium of science fiction would be the most logical way through which we could achieve our means effectively. And so our agents looked around carefully for a human with intelligence and understanding enough to aid us.

"After much thought and deliberation, it was decided that the human most suitable was a writer named Gene Roddenberry."

"I can't believe this!" Eleanor exclaimed, although it was the explanation she had expected. "You aren't telling me that Star Trek is a factual representation of the actual interplanetary federation you belong to? Of life in the galaxy? Don't get me wrong - I would like to think it is. But Gene Roddenberry created Star Trek himself - didn't he?"

"Indeed he did. I told you we searched for a human with intelligence and understanding," the Vulcan said gravely. "In any world there are visionaries; people with wisdom enough to perceive the truth. Gene Roddenberry did create Star Trek, and created it very accurately, with no help from us at all; as you have guessed, Star Trek is a very close representation of life in our galaxy, with the exception of the involvement of Terrans. But within a few decades we hope that will be changed, and that humankind will have evolved enough to take an active part in federation life, such as Gene Roddenberry imagined."

"But then how did you help?" Eleanor could see only one possibility. "Did you suggest putting Vulcans in the series?"

The Vulcan paused and stared closely at her again. "Indeed. When our agents discovered that Gene Roddenberry had created this television programme, and we discovered how accurate his ideas were, and equally important, the beliefs and ideals he planned to discuss in the series, we decided it was time to act. We knew that if Vulcans - it did not need to be Vulcans, it could have been any member race not too different in appearance to humans to alarm them, but it had to be different enough, mainly to see how Terrans would accept the idea of aliens of a totally dissimilar background to themselves, different ways, living peacefully alongside themselves - we knew that if Vulcans could be introduced to them as Vulcans really are, through science fiction, when the time came for us to contact them in reality, we would be accepted far more readily than otherwise."

"But what did you do?"

"Our agents, those nearest in appearance to humans - there are races in the galaxy very similar in appearance to yourselves, as I have said - infiltrated the television studios where it was proposed the series should be made, in many

different capacities of employment, and were accepted as perfectly ordinary members of the studio staff. Carefully, so that no-one would notice what they were doing, they made suggestions. Not too many, but enough. Gene Roddenberry and the script writers working on Star Trek in those days were very perceptive people, and not too many suggestions were needed. They could see most things for themselves, and with only a little help from our agents, what emerged in the television series was a representation of the Vulcan people which is very little different from reality."

"But - why me? Why did you choose to tell me?" Eleanor was still almost in a state of shock. What the Vulcan had told her made so much sense, and was so wonderful she really could hardly believe it. She knew that later on she would start to wonder how on earth for once she had been in the right place at the right time. But she knew also that whatever happened now, her life was never going to be exactly the same again.

"We chose you because you were here, encountered us, and were perceptive enough and wise enough to listen, and to understand. You are not the only human to whom this truth will be revealed, but you are the first to hear it all. The time is coming, slowly, but it is coming, when we will reveal ourselves to the whole of the people of Earth. You are merely fortunate that you came here today."

"Yes, I am," said Eleanor, smiling suddenly at the irony of his words; she, who for years had thought she would always be in the wrong place when anything of importance happened.

"But there is one thing more." The Vulcan didn't seem to have finished his explanation.

Eleanor looked at him expectantly, though she doubted that there was anything left he could tell her which would surprise her more than she had already been surprised that day, short of the offer of a trip in the alien spacecraft.

She was wrong. Even as the Vulcan continued with his explanation, she saw a sight which made her eyes open wide and her knees start to tremble.

"It was decided that for the sake of authenticity, our agents would do all they could to suggest that an actor was chosen to represent a Vulcan in Star Trek who closely resembled a living Vulcan," the Vulcan continued. But Eleanor hardly heard him. She couldn't take her eyes from the figure approaching them from the direction of the hidden spacecraft.

"We succeeded better than we hoped in this," said the Vulcan, noticing her expression, and turning round to see what was causing her reaction. Having discovered what it was, he turned back to her and continued, though watching her closely.

"Yes," said the Vulcan. "The actor eventually chosen closely resembled a Vulcan who was involved in the observation of Earth in those days. He has since gained promotion; he is my commanding officer, in fact. I believe he is about to join us."

But Eleanor wasn't hearing him any longer. Neither did she notice him, or the other alien still standing silently at his side. Her whole being was focused on the tall, slim figure approaching. He came and stood in front of her, and raised his hand in the Vulcan salute, his right eyebrow raised in that expression she had seen so often on the face of another, and as she prepared herself to give the response to the traditional Vulcan greeting she somehow knew he was going to give, the full wonder of that moment hit her.

His face wore the familiar features she had seen so many times on her TV screen. And he was as imposing a figure in real life as he had ever been in Star Trek.

This Spock was real...

HEAVENLY FIRE

I have made a study
 Of that man named Kirk.
 He has become well-known in history
 For his exploits, explorations,
 For his exceptional bravery.
 He spent his life in that vast unknown of space,
 Perhaps a Caesar of the stars...
 But I believe he is Alexander, reincarnate.

How, you may well ask,
 Do I come by this conclusion?
 May I simply refer you to his features;
 To his personality; to his reputation;
 To his soul. To what he was!
 None other could be so identical,
 In every way, to that great man Alexander,
 Than he!

The same hair of golden bronze;
 The same musculature;
 The same confident air of command;
 The unique ability to lead all men,
 And be respected, and loved, for and because of that leadership.
 The compassion, the strength, the ability to love.
 And eyes which said what words could not -
 The eyes of heavenly fire.

Both men were unique in their lifetimes.
 Neither having an equal - men amongst men.
 Their passing through life's highways
 Ensured the fact that they would live for ever.
 History has proven that few like them exist,
 And their very presence must go into historic annals
 For those who follow on -
 Providing a dream for their descendants to wish to fulfil.

.

I, Samej, son of Spock of Vulcan, grandson of Ambassador
 Sarek and Lady Amanda, remember my father's words before
 his death. He told me all concerning that man, James T.
 Kirk, and made me wish that I had known him. Those words
 remain within the facets of my mind, never and always
 touching and touched:

'Jim was a unique individual, and I love him. I go now
 to join him. My son, be like him, if you can, and honour
 his name. There will never be another as he.

'Remember us.'

My father, I hereby pledge to do as you bade me.

Karen Hayden.

REUNION by Lorraine Goodison

Six hundred credits! proclaimed the sign in numbers not too bold to frighten off window browsers. It rested on a dress cut from shimmering purple and gold Andorian cloth, light, flouncy, totally feminine.

This particular window browser stared at it for a long time before reluctantly tearing herself away from the shop. I told myself that I would never have a chance to wear it anyway, but it didn't stop me dreaming. It had been too long since I wore something like that - soft, flowing against the skin...

Oh, stop it, Christine. You came down here for a breath of fresh air and to stretch your legs, nothing else.

My mental admonishment, however, did not stop me smiling at the thought of regally sweeping into Sickbay in that outfit. I could just imagine a certain Southern gent's jaw dropping clear to the floor before he asked where the hell my uniform was. Oh dear, the efficient doctor's turned into a woman...

Shut up.

I walked along the edge of the crowds hoping I wouldn't see anyone from the ship. Right now I wanted some distraction from the daily routine, not gossip about the patients. I especially wanted to dodge Nurse Abernethy. Her sole topic nowadays seemed to concern James T. Kirk.

We were only in orbit for five hours, barely enough time to do anything, but I was grateful for the chance to breathe unconstituted air. Out here in the streets surrounding the base, a woman could relax and remind herself what life was like outside the quiet bustle of the Enterprise.

Over the moving heads and piles of goods I spotted a sign bearing the legend 'Real coffee!'. Well, I doubted that assurance for a start, but I began to push my way over there all the same. I was almost across when a hauntingly familiar voice stopped me in my tracks.

"Hi there, stranger. Aren't you going to at least say hello?"

When I turned and looked behind me in confusion, there was my oldest sister, that same teasing smile on her lips.

"Well, Chris?" she prompted.

I felt a surge of emotion that left me breathless and weepy. "Lyn, I - where did you... How - oh Christ..."

"Hey, don't cry on me," she smiled, taking my hand and squeezing it tightly. At that, I dropped my bags and hugged her, even though she tried to pull away. Same old Lyn - never could stand emotional demonstrations.

"I never expected to see you - this is amazing..." I stammered, fumbling for the bags. Desperate to sit down before my legs gave way, I gestured toward the cafe I was heading for. "Look, I need a coffee and a seat to recover from this. You coming?"

The tease was still in her eyes. "Sure, Chrissy. I'm thirsty myself."

Chrissy. I hadn't been called that in years. It left a warm glow inside.

The cafe was decorated in a slightly old-fashioned way, complete with waitress service. We found a window table, ordered, and sat back to look at each other.

Lyn. Dark hair curled into a short cap framing her face, a face carved with more worry and frown lines than I cared to see. She studied me with equal intentness, then sat back as the waitress arrived with cups and saucers.

"Well...you look okay. How is life treating you?"

"I...can't complain," I replied, feeling a flare of annoyance at my sudden inability to say anything more meaningful or appropriate. All these years apart, and Dr. Chapel was acting like a prize jerk.

The coffee came, breaking the stupid, awkward silence. I noted the absence of a uniform and wondered what Lyn was doing here. As I poured out the coffee, I finally found a question.

"It's funny, us meeting after - what? Ten, twelve years? What are you doing now?"

"I work here, in Commissioner Ardell's office."

"In the base?" I echoed. "But your career...I thought - "

"It didn't work out," Lyn cut in, a hint of bitterness in her voice. "Someone somewhere decided I wasn't suitable for command. I made it as far as lieutenant-commander, and then... Don't let them kid you there's such a thing as equality in Starfleet, Chris."

"I'm sure it's nothing like that," I began, and faltered when I saw the expression on her face. Lyn had always been pretty ambitious, the first to leave home for the great unknown. It had obviously hit her hard, the knowledge that she could never realise her dreams.

I changed the subject slightly. "What does your job involve?"

She glanced down at her coffee, stirring in the sugar. "Various duties," she answered. "General things, you know the kind. I guess you could call me the Commissioner's aide."

"Oh." I tried to smile. "Sounds...interesting."

"Bullshit. It isn't, but it has its...compensations."

"Is Ardell married?"

Her head snapped up, suspicion on her face. "Why?"

I floundered, unable to find a reason for my question. Perhaps it was the memories of the Lyn I had known before, but even if it was like that, what damn right had I to ask? Too late.

Lyn put down her cup. "Okay - so I share his bed. Big deal. His wife is a cripple, Chris, a certified vegetable. He needed what I could offer, and... hell, he's got to have a life!"

My mouth opened, but I stopped the condemning judgement before it burst out. I wasn't any fit person to give advice on my sister's sex life, never mind morals. At the same time, I felt a strange surprise and fear that Lyn should feel compelled to defend herself in this way. Gone were the days when she did as she wished, and damn everyone else's feelings.

Then the instant was gone, a smile dispersing her anger. "How are you coping, sis? Your last tape said you were still a nurse, but that uniform sure isn't a nurse's."

"You never answered my tapes, so I stopped sending them," I replied self-righteously. "Besides, after you were transferred, I could never find out where you were."

"You know what I'm like with tapes and stargrams... Anyway, the Enterprise was always heading off places without notice. It's easy to lose touch."

"Too easy," I muttered, remembering the time when I had needed Lyn and she had not come. "I presume you got the tape about Pat?"

She sighed, swirled the last dregs of coffee in her cup. "Yes. I wanted to come to the funeral, but circumstances... You coped all right, didn't you?"

"Sure." A non-committal reply, backed by an absence of the resentment which had once accompanied that particular memory. The awkward silence descended again.

"How do you like being a doctor, then? When I heard the Enterprise was in orbit, I checked the crew list on a hunch, and there you were! I see the Vulcan - Spock, wasn't it - is still around. You still an item?"

Unsure what to say, I pussyfooted around the subject. "We never were, not really. Difficult to say with Vulcans..."

She grinned. "You can say that again. Chris, when you told me about him, I could not believe it! You weren't that desperate, were you?"

The flippant remark hurt a little, but I let it pass. "Infatuation, nothing more," I replied, reluctant to discuss that period of my life. The thought of it still made me cringe at time. "That's behind me now."

"Thank God for that! A Vulcan as a brother-in-law would have been - "

"Shut up, Lyn," I grated, ashamed at my anger. After so long apart, all we could do was argue. I felt suddenly weary. Lyn was prattling on the way she did when she was younger.

"Glad to see you stopped dying your hair - it looked awful. Of course, that was after Roger ran off, wasn't it..."

Roger. I tried to remember his face, and couldn't. The one thing I did recall was the many times my elder sister had failed to give me the strength she had always said was mine for the asking. Mom died, and I coped. Roger left, and I survived, even through the finding and losing of him in later years. When our sister Pat died, killed in a freak accident soon after she left the Enterprise, I fielded that pain too. Now all that was left was bitter resentment.

The cafe seemed suddenly oppressive and confining, making me desperate to get back to the ship. That's it, Christine, run back to your safe hole and hide. Isn't that what you've done all your life?

Maybe, I answered myself. But if I have, whose fault is it? I took the path given me. I'm better off than many.

I drained my cup and rose. "Lyn, I have to go. The ship leaves in an hour, and I have to settle a few things first."

She looked startled, and more than a little despondent at my words. "Can't you stay a little longer?" she asked, and I suddenly felt that our positions were reversed. Over the years, I had developed a strength which helped me live, while Lyn, strange as it seemed, had lost hers.

I smiled, sat down again. "I shouldn't, but - okay."

We talked easily, ordering more coffee and swapping stories until I realised I had ten minutes left and Leonard would be tearing his hair out wondering where I was. Reluctantly I reminded Lyn of my duties.

"Hey, don't worry," she grinned. "You've got a sickbay up there to look after."

"Sure I have." My eyes searched her face. "It's...been good seeing you, Lyn."

"Same here. You make sure you send me tapes now, you hear? I guess I'll be here for some time."

I nodded, tears flooding my eyes. My mouth felt dry, and I wanted to say so much, but all that came out was - "Good luck, big sister. Take care."

"You too, Chrissy. Go shock all those stuffy Enterprise officers for me."

"I will."

We stared at each other for a moment, then Lyn reached out and pulled me close, and I, the youngest, stay-at-home member of our family, comforted her.

Dr. McCoy was waiting for me in the transporter room when I beamed up,

foot tapping in exasperation.

"Where have you been? You cut it fine, leaving it until three minutes before we break orbit!"

I shrugged, not particularly concerned with his feelings on the close call. "I met someone. We got talking."

As I headed out the door, I could hear him muttering to the ensign on duty about typical, gossiping women, but there was no point in correcting him.

It took only a minute or so to reach my cabin and divest myself of my bags, then I sat in front of the computer screen, keyed the mike, and began my tape to Lyn.

There was a lot to say.

THE PLAINS OF BROTHERHOOD

The wings of peace
Flew over the plains of brotherhood,
And I could finally look at this man beside me,
Alien to so many eyes - not mine -
And savour pointed ears of elegance,
Appreciate the intellect surpassing that of infidels
Of the dream,
And say: I love.

In time I came to realise that it was more
Than love.
I soon came to know
That I could not live
Without him at my side.
Our lives became joined, a union
Far surpassing others, throughout history.
We became mountains on the plain...

Stretching upwards to the stars, and beyond.
A rupture of conformity,
And a dissemination of the 'normality'
Which creates so much wrath.
Unique, we're told, for we would give our lives
To save the other.
And yet, we do not think that...
It, as all, is so natural to both of us.

The subtle smile aimed but at me,
Expressive eyes say all,
A depth to those windows, as to the soul,
That makes me feel in awe.
To be accepted by uniqueness, by unequalled individuality
As the friend and brother that I think him...
That makes the life worthwhile,
And the existence so wonderful.

Karen Hayden

HITCH-HIKER by Janette Burton

"Captain, a communique from Starfleet coming in, sir. Priority two."

Kirk turned his chair to take a sideways look at Uhura. "Put it on the main screen, Lieutenant."

Turning forward again, he heard Uhura reply, "Aye, sir," and watched the image on the screen transform from the familiar star pattern to the equally familiar face of Admiral Komack.

"Enterprise, Starfleet has given clearance for you to divert to Marcadia to pick up Mr. Noel Money and transport him to colony three of the Rajoleon group. This will cause little delay to your flight schedule. Please acknowledge. Komack, Starfleet command, out."

There had been more than a Vulcan eyebrow raised at the name of Noel Money. All the bridge personnel, indeed, the entire Enterprise crew, knew of the famous actor.

"Uhura - message acknowledged. Enterprise will comply." Kirk was smiling as he went on to say, "So we are to have the company of Mr. Money. That should prove quite entertaining."

Although the Captain's statement had been directed at no-one in particular, Mr. Spock picked up the train of thought and folding his arms across his chest, replied, "Indeed, Captain. Starfleet does Mr. Money a great honour. Very few actors are privileged enough to obtain transportation by Starship."

"You mean not everyone gets the chance to hitch-hike on the Enterprise," offered Kirk, wearing his teasing smile.

"I believe that is what I said, Captain." Spock's tone was one of slight indifference; only Kirk knew it was not.

"Well, whichever way, you know you are right, Mr. Spock. Starfleet does him a great honour and the Enterprise will extend her hospitality also. Mr. Money has done a great deal to bridge the gap between the space service and the planet-bound inhabitants of Earth and her colonies."

"Indeed he has, Captain," commented Spock. "The science fiction programme in which he stars is set against a scientific background based on the knowledge of the universe as we understand it. I believe the show gains its appeal from the fact that explanations are kept simple without losing the scientific significance of the stories."

"I think most people like his show because it portrays the human angle," stated Uhura, who was obviously a fan. "The scientific aspect is secondary to them."

"I like it for the good old-fashioned action-packed adventure," enthused Kirk. "It will be interesting to see if Mr. Money is anything like the fictional character he portrays."

"New course plotted and laid in, sir," said Sulu, breaking into the conversation.

"Very well, Mr. Sulu. Let's go to Marcadia. E.T.A. Mr. Chekov?" asked Kirk.

"Estimated time of arrival, three point seven hours, sir."

"Thank you, Ensign." Kirk turned again to Uhura. "Lieutenant, would you allocate Mr. Money appropriate quarters. His stay aboard will be short, but we must make him comfortable."

"Yes, sir. I'll see to it straight away," replied the beautiful young woman.

The rest of the bridge contingent got on with their routine tasks, running

Starfleet's most prestigious Starship through the void of space.

"Mr. Sulu, you have the con. Mr. Spock, you will accompany me to the transporter room." Kirk had risen from the command chair and was giving his instructions on the way to the turbolift.

Spock obediently joined his Captain and the couple made their way to greet the guest on his beam-up from the planet.

"I know this may sound strange to you, Spock, but I'm pleased to have the opportunity of meeting Mr. Money. I'm tempted to ask for his autograph," said Kirk when they were in the privacy of the turbolift.

"A quaint Earth custom, I believe, Captain - However, I fail to see the significance of such an act," replied the Vulcan in his 'you strange Humans' tone.

"Oh well - perhaps it isn't fitting for a Starship Captain to ask for autographs," sighed Kirk.

The lift doors opened before Spock could agree, and the two made the rest of the journey in silence.

Entering the transporter room, Kirk asked the duty officer if Mr. Money was ready to come aboard. He was, and all eyes watched the multicoloured effect of the transporter as it hummed into activity and deposited an austere, middle-aged gentleman on the platform.

Stepping forward, offering an outstretched hand, Kirk said, "Welcome aboard the Enterprise, sir. I am Captain Kirk."

The gentleman took the proffered hand and shook it politely. Then, allowing the visitor to step down, Kirk went on to say,

"This is Mr. Spock, my First Officer."

Spock said nothing, but inclined his head in a gesture of acknowledgement.

"Thank you for my passage to Rajoleon, Captain. A journey aboard a Starship is a treat for me," said Mr. Money.

"We hope your stay will be an enjoyable one, and your presence is a pleasure to us all. My crew is familiar with your science fiction show," said Kirk, trying not to look like a little boy who had just met his idol.

"Indeed! I am honoured."

"Mr. Spock will show you to your quarters if you would care to step this way," said Kirk, making for the door, but as they started to move off, the transporter officer cleared his throat rather loudly and asked,

"I wonder if I might ask Mr. Money for his autograph, Captain?"

Kirk stopped in his tracks and his eyes met Spock's. The Vulcan's expression showed a trace of amusement. Kirk felt a giggle bubbling inside him as he knew Spock was also recalling the conversation in the turbolift. He contained it and managed to stay straight-faced as he said, "As long as Mr. Money does not mind."

"I am well used to such things," the visitor sighed in reply, and with an air of reluctance signed the hastily produced autograph book.

"Thank you, sir," was heard from the transporter room as the doors slid shut behind them.

Kirk could not make out if the transporter officer had been thanking him or Mr. Money.

Some time later, Captain Kirk was waiting - somewhat impatiently - for his

distinguished guest to arrive for dinner. He had had a rec room set aside for the meal. Spock and McCoy were also invited, but as yet he was alone.

Kirk eyed the beautifully set table with satisfaction. Mr. Sulu had kindly provided a colourful potted plant for the centre of the table. The lighting was slightly dimmed and a cassette of music lay waiting to be played.

Kirk's attention was attracted by some sort of commotion outside the door. The doors slid open, and a wall of sound hit his eardrums. He saw Spock holding Mr. Money by the elbow, steering him through a throng of noisy people into the relative quiet of the rec room.

"Spock, what on earth is going on?" shouted the Captain above the noise.

"It would seem Mr. Money is rather popular with the crew,..or should I say, his autograph is greatly desired," replied Spock, releasing his hold on the grateful guest and readjusting his own uniform, which had become somewhat askew in the tussle.

The doors slid shut, and the noise subsided.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock. Your timely arrival was much appreciated," responded the actor.

"I did not realise your presence aboard would cause such a stir," began Kirk in apology. "I am sorry for the inconvenience to you. My crew will be reprimanded. It will not happen again."

"No matter, Captain. I am quite used to being recognised. It is a price you pay as an actor."

"My crew is usually better disciplined than that, but I must admit, when I heard you were to come aboard, I was pleased to have the chance of meeting you," said Kirk, who could understand the crew's reaction to Mr. Money. However, he felt he should have anticipated their reaction, and taken precautionary measures.

"You do me great honour, Captain Kirk. Surely the privilege is all mine. You must be aware that Starfleet regards the Enterprise as the finest in the Fleet, as it does her Captain."

Kirk was saved from an embarrassed reply by the entrance of McCoy.

"Here is my Chief Medical Officer, Leonard McCoy," he said hastily, changing the subject as quickly as he could. "Bones is the one who keeps us all in good working order around here."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Money," said McCoy as he shook hands with the actor. "I am a fan of yours. You wouldn't mind if I asked for your autograph, would you? You see, I have this nephew on Alpha..." McCoy's words trailed to a halt at the sudden ripple of laughter that had erupted from his Captain and spread to Mr. Money. Even the corners of Spock's mouth had risen slightly, along with his eyebrows.

"Hey, what have I said? Will someone please let me in on this, or do I leave now?" protested McCoy.

Spock supplied the explanation while the other two Humans continued to laugh heartily. McCoy too eventually saw the funny side of it. In a strange sort of way the ice had been broken, and the evening was off to a good start.

Four courses of food and two bottles of brandy later, all - except Spock, of course, who was still sober - were having a merry time.

"I am looking forward to reaching Rajal Three. It is a long time since I have been home," spoke Money, a touch of melancholy in his voice.

"I had always assumed you originated from Earth," said McCoy.

"Yes, most people do. It's because I play a Terran in the show. People don't think of me as Noel Money, actor, but as Mark Martins, the hyperspace time traveller from Earth. Whenever I go anywhere, people expect me to arrive in my

time machine. It becomes a bit trying at times."

"Your appeal is very wide, Mr. Money, as must be your recognition," began Spock. "Your series is broadcast on Vulcan - where it is appreciated for its technical and historical accuracy."

"It pleases me that the show reaches such a wide and varied audience."

"Yes, you have been attributed with bringing a better understanding of space exploration to the mass populations of Earth and her colonies," Kirk went on. "The people who will never have the chance to visit alien worlds gain a knowledge of the galaxy through your show, and what's more, you do it in such an entertaining way."

"I have heard that said before, Captain," replied Money. "But from now on, my time ship will travel without me. Mark Martins is no more. You will find he dies in the next series."

Silence descended over the room as three pairs of wide eyes stared at the visitor.

"I feel the need for a change - after all, I am an actor. Mark Martins is dead; long live Noel Money," he said, raising his glass in a toast to himself, but no response came. After a moment, he drank the toast alone and banged the empty glass down on the table.

"I can't believe you are serious," spoke Kirk, in what was almost a whisper. "You no longer wish to portray Mark Martins?"

"That is correct, Captain," the actor replied.

"But the show is so popular," protested McCoy. "So many people look to you as their bridge across the universe. As Spock said, even Vulcans watch it. No disrespect, Spock, but I find it hard to believe what I am hearing."

"I'm only Human, you know. I need a change. All things must end," replied the actor rather angrily as he poured himself another drink.

"But surely, sir, there is no need to kill the character," said Spock in his usual impassive tone, but Kirk and McCoy had seen the surprise on the Vulcan's face on hearing the news.

"If I want him dead, then he dies. End of story." The Vulcan's tone had angered Money and the consumed liquor had loosened his tongue a little too much.

"There is no need to be rude, Mr. Money," said Spock indignantly. "As I see it, you seem unaware of the significance of the character you play. Your very presence aboard the Enterprise is witness to respect for that character. If it had not been for Mark Martins, I doubt very much whether you would be here now."

"That's enough, Mr. Spock," said Kirk sharply, and his eyes met the Vulcan's. He felt as strongly as Spock, but could not allow his First Officer to argue with a guest aboard his ship. "We are all...sorry...to hear that Mark Martins will no longer entertain us, but your decision is your own private affair, sir, and we must accept that."

"Thank you, Captain. I am glad you see it my way. Now, gentlemen, I think I shall return to my quarters. Thank you for an enjoyable meal."

The three Enterprise officers rose from the table as Mr. Money departed, and once the doors had shut behind him slumped back into their chairs.

"Well, what about that guy?" sighed McCoy. "I was beginning to like him when he dropped that bombshell. You should have let Spock wipe the floor with him, Jim. Why didn't you?"

"You know very well why not, Bones," replied Kirk. "And you, Spock, should have known better." But the Captain could not help smiling at what Spock had said. "I know you insulted him, but it was the politest insult I've ever heard."

"Indeed? Thank you, Captain," said Spock, raising an eyebrow.

"Mark Martins has given that man everything he has," started McCoy again. "A generation has grown up with a better understanding of space through him. And now, because Mr. God Almighty Noel Money has got a bit bored, all that must end. Where is his loyalty to the millions who have made him what he is?"

"I know, Bones. He does seem to be being rather selfish, but I think he'll find his popularity will end with the death of his character." Inwardly, Kirk hoped that that would be the case.

"I wonder if we have let things get a little out of perspective here," pondered Spock. "I agree with what you say, Doctor, but after all, it is only a science fiction programme."

"It's more than that to the millions back on Earth, Spock," chided McCoy. "For them, it is the only realistic voyage into space they get."

"Yes, you are correct, Doctor," replied Spock. "He is indeed a selfish man and does not deserve the honour Starfleet gives him."

"Well, gentlemen, seeing my First Officer and my Chief Medical Officer agreeing on something tells me this is an appropriate moment on which to end the evening," Kirk said, smiling broadly at his two friends.

"You're right, as usual, Jim," smiled McCoy, rising from the table along with the others.

They walked together, in silence, to the door.

"Goodnight, gentlemen," said McCoy as he left the Captain and the Vulcan standing in the corridor.

"Well, Spock, we get rid of Mr. Money tomorrow."

"I shall not be sorry to see him go, Captain."

"Isn't it strange, Spock. This morning, I was so pleased that I was going to meet him, but now I realise it's not him that interests me at all. It's Mark Martins."

"I understand, Captain. I am sure Mark Martins would prove to be a far nicer person than Mr. Money."

"Huh," shrugged Kirk. "I'm sure you're right there."

"Goodnight, Jim."

"Goodnight, Spock."

Next day, Mr. Money departed from the Enterprise...into oblivion on Rajol Three.

RANK HATH NO PRIVILEGES by J. Patterson

I love you.
 Strange; I always knew it,
 Yet I could never admit it openly.
 A Captain does not - must not -
 Woo his subordinates.
 But now the five-year mission is at an end;
 The crew is being scattered, some to promotion,
 Some to civilian life, their tour of duty complete,
 And some to posts on other ships.
 I may never see you again; you who are no longer under my command.
 But even so, I dare not say it openly -
 Because, an Admiral now, I am still your senior officer.

WILLING SACRIFICE by Karen Hayden

The darkness was light. The sound was silence. The hope was despair. And dreams were for those who slept...

There was no sleep for the pain-ridden man who now floated in a miasma of subconsciousness. His sweat-covered body ached with every breath; blood oozed from the numerous cuts which covered him; he was aware of nothing but the pain from his shattered body, and the inevitable fear of the unknown which he knew awaited him. His thoughts wandered, retreating into near distance reality...

The Vulcan had protested, as he always did, at the foolhardy impetuosity which drove his Captain to undertake missions himself, instead of sending others to undertake the job, even when there was evident danger, and only a minor chance of success. But his charisma, his charm, his persuasiveness, had won out again over the logic and the all-too-apparent concern of the First Officer, and the Chief Medical Officer too. The same, age-old argument - he would not send another to do what he himself would not; it was part of him, the need to do things himself; and he would not change. And it was not surprising to hear the arguments. They were repeated each time a planetfall was imminent, and it was all a part of the triad that could not be ignored.

It had always seemed so uniquely special to one particular man aboard the Starship Enterprise, dressed in security red, that those three men of such apparent diversity should feel such a rapport for each other, such a warmth, such a deep, deep friendship, so much...love. He had noticed it as soon as he had come aboard, had seen the way the three had looked at each other in that private, significant way - penetrating, expressive hazel eyes, brilliant blue ones, and those deep brown ones which held such depth. It was the kind of affection which had no equal, the kind of relationship which lasted for all eternity.

And now, his first planetfall, and he had been assigned to landing party duty to accompany the Captain himself on what should prove to be a routine planet survey. He remembered the sight of his commanding officer as he had entered the transporter room, flanked on either side by his unique friends, worry ill-concealed on their faces, their eyes never leaving the man named Kirk. That gold-clad figure had ensured by his very presence that confidence and enthusiasm were more than apparent amongst those who would accompany him. He was enough to cause all to succumb to his very bearing, his inestimable charm. All would surpass themselves because of him, and for him.

It took only minutes for him to brief the landing party, the young man's eyes watching his every move, assessing exactly what this man was. They were to keep alert, despite the fact that sensors revealed no inhabitants upon the planetoid which they orbited. The aim was to find deposits of prixine, if, in fact, any was present. It was a brittle, orange-coloured rock which was most valuable within medical circles, and it was standard procedure now to make a sweep of any planets upon which it was thought to be.

They all mounted the transporter platform, the young man just behind his Captain, whose life would be his responsibility. The last thing he remembered were those same blue and brown eyes watching helplessly as their friend and Captain, James T. Kirk, once more entered into the danger that was part of the life he led, part of the man he was.

Three hours later they were attacked. All five members of the landing party were seriously injured - the yellow shirt, paramount in his thinking and his concern, lay unmoving in front of him, a spreading stain of red upon its chest. His colleague, the other security man, was the first to die, the yeoman succumbed soon afterwards. They lay helplessly watching, at the feet of the aliens who had attacked them, about whom they knew nothing. Time dragged on;

the aliens seeming to revel in the sight of their agony. He, being the least injured, in the party, tried his best to communicate, to reason with them, to make them understand that they meant them no harm. But they did not comprehend - or seem to care. Their maniacal eyes seemed to glisten with undefined anticipation at the impending deaths of the Humans, their mouths salivating, sneering.

After minutes that had passed into an hour, then two, they began to drag wood into the clearing in front of the landing party, and piled upon it some of the same orange rock for which they had sought. His clouded brain took only seconds to register the fact that a bonfire was taking shape - seconds after that, he registered their intent...

He was a big man, and had always been proud of his musculature, his fitness, and he stood almost six feet six inches in height...and there were only five of the aliens who seemed interested in completing the task they had set themselves, the others having drifted off to watch the proceedings from a distance. He dragged himself to his feet, forcing his legs to hold him steady, to accentuate his height - he stood a full two feet taller than any of them! He pointed to the yellow-topped trees which stood at the far side of the clearing - he was grateful that they had been returning to the beam-down point when they had been attacked - then he pointed at the Captain. The hazel eyes had opened and were staring at him. Kirk tried to speak but a coughing fit shook him until blood trickled from his mouth. Oh, those eyes. They pleaded with him, begged him, said what words could not - but he knew what he had to do, for himself, for the Captain, and for those two men on board ship, he of the deep brown eyes, and he of the brilliant blue ones, and no amount of pleading would change his decision. There was the pretty young yeoman, too, whom he had dated a few times. She still lived, despite the fact that her arm was severed, and her head was bleeding from a hole the size of a sopat. Poor kid. She was so much younger than he, so vulnerable. He sighed as he pictured, vividly, the gold-clad man place himself before her in an attempt to save her injury in the affray, only to be badly injured himself. She still lived now - because of Captain Kirk. But he???

The aliens' eyes followed his hands as he pointed to them, then himself; then from himself to the growing stack of wood. He was not expecting understanding, or mercy; he hadn't any real hope of a reprieve for his companions - but it came. The aliens grunted, shaking their heads in an obvious gesture of acknowledgement, their purple hair dancing around them. Their great feet kicked him savagely, as if testing the produce, then they grabbed the girl and Kirk and dragged them to those very trees, dumping them unceremoniously behind them, out of sight. He pressed the emergency button on his communicator, as he sighed with relief at his apparent success. There had been no opportunity before this to attempt to contact help - the transporter would only operate in that particular area, that behind the trees; and they weren't overdue with their check-in and report yet, so those on board the Enterprise had not suspected any trouble. He cursed his inability, his helplessness to do more. He cursed himself for allowing the attack to occur, despite the fact that it had been so sudden that no-one could have prevented it. Guilt pervaded his very soul.

As he watched the aliens return to him, as he lay once more upon the ground to which they had kicked him, he remembered those hazel eyes, and praised infinity that there could be such a man. He gained precious comfort from those thoughts. He remembered those eyes, and those of the Vulcan, and the doctor too, as they slowly dismembered him. Pain was secondary to the fact that he had given himself, his very life, so that he of the hazel eyes, unique man and Captain, could live, to enable him to return to those two men on board ship, so that he could have them, and they him, again.

The rumours that he had heard, those which told of so many people prepared to give their lives for that man named Kirk, that everyone would follow him to hell and back...they were true, he realised...

...For he had done just that...

NO DOCTOR...MERELY INTERESTING by Doreen DaBinett

"Well, what do you think?"

"Down a bit on the left, Jim." The Doctor bent his head to one side and squinted hard as Kirk moved to obey. "Mmmm - a bit more...no, up a bit!"

"Okay now?" the Captain asked hopefully.

"Well, I think... No, up a bit on the right, Jim."

"Bones!" Kirk grabbed the corner and pushed it up recklessly.

"Too far, Jim."

"Oh, to hell with it!"

The Vulcan had stood throughout in total silence; now he stepped forward purposefully. "If I may, Captain?"

"Sure, why not? Go ahead, Spock." Kirk stepped back to stand beside McCoy as the Vulcan stood square on to the wall, and then touched the corner fractionally.

"Perfect, Mr. Spock." Kirk grinned openly at his First Officer. "Just right - eh, Bones?"

The Doctor humphed, and picked up his glass.

"Well come on," Kirk urged as he looked from one to the other. "What do you think of it?"

"It's good, Jim, but if Admiral Zak comes on board, I'd take it down or cover it up if I were you."

"Take it down?" Kirk echoed. "It's taken me over an hour to get it up there!"

"Well, you know as well as I do how old-fashioned he is... I did hear he's joined a Traditionalist group - wants to bring back some of the Old World morals."

Kirk nodded. "And Old World hang-ups, too... Amazing how these people always say that curtailing personal freedom is for our good. What do you think of it, Spock?"

The Vulcan had already made up his own mind, but he studied the painting politely. "It is...unusual, Captain," he conceded diplomatically.

"Yes, it is, isn't it?" Kirk agreed happily. "You're a man of taste, Mr. Spock."

"Indeed, sir."

Kirk shot a quick look at him, but the stern face was giving nothing away, and he decided to give his friend the benefit of the doubt.

"Where'd you pick it up from?" McCoy asked as he refilled his glass.

"I didn't, Bones. D'you remember Jason McDonald?" Seeing that the Doctor obviously didn't, he went on. "You met him at that party at Starbase 7."

McCoy snapped his fingers. "Of course - Stephanie, red hair, green eyes..." His hands moved expressively in the air, nearly slopping the contents of his glass over Spock in the process.

Kirk chuckled. "Well, Jason wasn't Stephanie, but at least you've got the right party," he said. "Jason's the one who did the strip-tease on the bar..."

"I remember!" McCoy ended up quickly. "He ended up wearing only a sporran. You pulled it off, as I recall."

"That's right. You missed out on that, didn't you, Spock?"

"Thankfully, Captain, yes."

"Don't be such a prude, Spock - do you good to let your hair down occasionally."

"My hair is down, Doctor."

"Now look here, you - "

"Bones! Drop it." Kirk turned to take a candy bar from the drawer, then had second thoughts as he looked at McCoy. He'd never hear the last of it if the Doctor saw his secret store... He turned back. "It was Jason gave me the painting. I met him last leave."

"Jason? But it's not your birthday, Jim, is it?"

"No. It surprised me, too," Kirk confessed. "I don't know him all that well, but he insisted I take it. He's a good artist too, isn't he?"

"Some people wouldn't agree, but...!" The Doctor winked suggestively.

Kirk laughed softly. /Damned erotic, isn't it?"

"Indeed, Captain."

Two sets of eyes turned to the First Officer. "Did I hear right, Jim?" McCoy asked incredulously.

"I am quite able to concede the painting's erotic value, Doctor," the Vulcan said stiffly.

McCoy snorted. "Well, if Spock says it's erotic, Jim, it must be! You'll have to take it down if Zak comes aboard."

"We'll see." Kirk's eyes twinkled mischievously as he surveyed the Human, Andorian and Vulcan entwined together. Leaning forward he patted the Andorian on the pale blue posterior, and seeing the Vulcan's raised eyebrow, grinned widely. "Just for luck, Mr. Spock," he explained to his obviously bemused friend.

A month later, the painting still held pride of place on Kirk's wall. It no longer caused much of a stir - only to new yecmen who either blushed and giggled or smiled appreciatively when they saw it for the first time. As far as Kirk himself was concerned, it had become just another part of the fixtures and fittings that constituted 'home' to him on the Enterprise.

Kirk looked up as his First Officer came in.

"We rendezvous in twelve hours, Captain."

"Good. It'll give us time to get some sleep - I've got an idea we won't get much for a while once we reach the Hood."

"Indeed. However, I will stay on duty, sir - "

"No you won't, Spock. Look - I know you can do without sleep for a hell of a time, but I want everyone clear-headed when we get there, and that includes you, Mister."

"Jim, I do assure you..."

"Yes, I know, Spock, but just get some rest." He smiled suddenly. "Humour me, huh?"

The lean face softened imperceptibly. "Yes, sir."

As the door closed once more behind the blue-clad figure, Kirk stood and stretched. He hated these escort jobs, and always had done. This time, they had to rendezvous with the Hood and take over her three charges - the Transporters that had been brought from Mars Station packed with colonists heading for a new life on Philidron, a lush and beautiful planet on the edge of the neutral zone. Philidron, however, had one very big drawback - the Romulans also claimed it, which was why the Federation was hurrying to establish a colony there before the Romulans did. Unfortunately, in order to reach the planet the Transporters had to approach very close to Romulan-dominated space, which was why the Enterprise

had to guard them. Kirk undressed slowly. One thing was sure, this was likely to be the last full night's sleep he'd have for some time; he'd better make the most of it.

The rendezvous went smoothly enough. The Captain of the Hood was only too pleased to hand over the responsibility to Kirk, and the Enterprise wasted no time in setting off with her three chicks in tow.

Even though throughout the trip Kirk had that familiar tingle at the back of his neck, their journey to Philidron proved uneventful, and sensors showed nothing hostile once they were in orbit. In fact, Kirk even began to chuckle at his own foolishness; he'd be jumping at shadows next, he chided himself quietly.

The Enterprise had to stay in orbit as protection for the embryo colony for seven days until two supply and protection vessels arrived, and could take up permanent watch. A force field would then be set up as full protection. On the sixth day, Kirk received a priority message from Admiral Stanley, which he took in his quarters. It appeared that an agent of the Federation was waiting to be picked up from an open planet not far from their present position.

The agent had important information that was necessary to Starfleet, but had apparently been followed. His message had also stated that if there was more than a twenty-four hour delay, it could prove fatal.

Kirk's orders were explicit. If he felt it was safe to leave the colony unprotected for twenty-four hours till the two supply vessels arrived, he should do so, and pick up the agent; if not, he was to remain and try for the agent after the agreed time, in the hope that he would still be alive. The decision, as always, was his.

Sensors showed that, as far as they could ascertain, they were no hostile vessels in their vicinity.

First, however, he called the Vulcan to his quarters to discuss the situation and explain his decision.

"It seems fairly straightforward, Captain," the Vulcan said at last.

"But you don't like it," Kirk said intuitively.

"No."

"For what it's worth, neither do I, but we're stuck with it." He leaned forward to call the bridge and issue the change of orders.

Lt. Z'dram, an Andorian, beamed down to the planet to meet up with the Federation agent. The population was largely Andorian, and it was considered that Z'dram would therefore draw the least attention. Once he had made contact with the man, he was to take him to the designated beam up point, and Mr. Scott would transport them on board. All quite simple.

It was only when Lt. Z'dram beamed back alone that Kirk began to have doubts. "What happened?" he demanded as soon as the sparkled stopped.

"I found the place all right, sir," the lieutenant said quickly. "I waited long past the time he'd said - then I started to ask a few discreet questions."

"And?" Kirk drew himself up quickly. "Sorry, lieutenant, I didn't mean to snap. Go ahead."

"It seems he started a row over some woman, and one of the patrons of the establishment killed him."

"A fight over a woman?" Kirk repeated incredulously. "What's a trained agent doing brawling over a woman?"

"Search me!...Sorry, Captain." The Andorian suddenly remembered he was speaking to his superior officer. "It seemed strange to me as well. But a lot

of people suddenly started to take an unusual amount of interest in me, too, so I decided to get out quickly and report."

"Very good, Lieutenant, you did the right thing. Better make out a full report; have it on my desk in two hours."

"Yes, sir." The Andorian saluted and marched out.

As the door closed behind him, Kirk shook his head and punched the transporter console. What the hell was Starfleet playing at? What a mess! He began to think of his own report to H.Q. as he walked back to his quarters.

Another month slipped by with nothing more exciting for the crew than star mapping, and for Kirk a broken thumb nail obtained during a workout with Chekov. Even Spock began to get 'that' look, as McCoy called it, and buried himself for hours on end in the lab.

"Captain!"

Kirk jerked awake, glancing around sheepishly. His head had almost been resting on his chest, but no-one on the bridge seemed to have noticed.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" He stifled a yawn by clearing his throat noisily.

"It's Captain Simmonds of the Ark Royal for you, sir," Uhura informed him.

"Don Simmonds? I haven't spoken to him for ages - pipe it through to my quarters, Uhura."

"Yes, sir." She smiled as he rose from the command chair and walked to the turbolift - he never could hide his boredom.

Kirk was only too pleased to have something to do. He slid into the chair, leaned across his desk, and depressed the switch. "Don? Jim Kirk. What can I do for you?"

"Hold on, Jim - scramble this, will you?"

"Sure thing." Kirk depressed the appropriate switch. Only he and Simmonds would know what passed between them now. "Okay, you can go ahead."

"Right. Look Jim, I'm on a top secret mission. Only trouble is, we've developed some trouble. My Chief Engineer is trying to fix it now, but I'm under orders not to contact Base, so I can't tell them what's happened. When my Communications Officer intercepted your last message to Starfleet, we realised that you're in this quadrant too - it was like manna from heaven, I can tell you."

Kirk smiled. "So what do you want me to do?"

"My navigator says you're only seven hours away from us; suppose we rendezvous and I'll beam over?"

"Fine. We're on our way. Be seeing you!" The screen blanked and he pressed the intercom.

As Kirk ushered him into his quarters, Simmond's eyebrows rose, and he whistled as he saw the painting on the wall.

"Thought you'd appreciate it," Kirk beamed.

"I've only seen that technique once before, on Rigel TV." Simmonds walked over to it, then passed it a couple of times. "I love the way they all seem to move..." He grinned widely.

"Yeah, so do I. Drink?"

"No, thanks - better not. I haven't had all that much sleep lately."

Kirk nodded sympathetically. "I've sent Mr. Scott to see if he can be of any help - he's a first class engineer."

"Thanks. I think it's going to take some time to put right."

Kirk poured himself a small brandy and sat, gesturing Simmonds to take a seat also. "Shoot."

"You've heard of Lybra, Jim?"

Kirk frowned in concentration. "Isn't that the place where civil war broke out a few months back?"

"That's the place. Our diplomats have been trying to sort it all out ever since, with no success. Anyway, the key to the whole thing seems to be the young Prince Playa - he's the only person who may be able to bring the two sides around the negotiating table."

"So what's the problem?" Kirk asked, and leaned back in his chair.

"Well - this is strictly off the record, Jim - it seems that outside influences started the damn war in the first place."

"Klingons?"

"Could be." Simmonds rubbed his eyes, then went on. "We've got our reasons to think so - best if you don't know too much about that. Anyway, I'm supposed to go and fetch the Prince and take him to Starbase 6 - the diplomats will take it from there."

"So you know where he is?" Kirk asked.

Simmonds hesitated momentarily, then grinned sheepishly. "Sorry, Jim - you know how jumpy it can get you."

"Yes, I do know," Kirk agreed softly.

"Yes. He's holed up in some caves in the Betshell Mountain Range."

"Right. So you want me to pick him up for you, and take him to Base?"

"That's it, Jim."

"Well, we're only star mapping; anything will make a break from that. We'll get under way at once."

Simmonds smiled with relief. "Thanks, Jim. You've taken a load off my mind."

"Is anyone alive in there?" Kirk asked in horror.

Spock put down his tricorder and shook his head. "No, Captain."

They both looked at the mountain side that had slipped down to entomb the people hiding in the caves, including Prince Playa. He shook his head. "This couldn't have happened very long ago," he murmured. "What bad luck."

"Luck, Captain?" The Vulcan's eyebrows rose. "Luck had nothing to do with it. It was not a natural occurrence."

"Not? Explain."

"According to my tricorder, a large explosion caused the mountain to slip," Spock replied.

"So someone knew the Prince was there?"

"It would seem so, sir."

"Okay, Spock. We'd better get back to the ship. We can't do anything for those poor devils in there." He pulled out his communicator.

The Enterprise slipped into orbit around Starbase 6. Kirk had to report to the Commodore in charge of the Base as to what exactly had happened on Lybra. A simple message reporting non-success of mission had already been sent, but more

details were obviously required.

The sparkle died and Kirk stepped down from the pad.

A young lieutenant stepped forward and saluted smartly. "Captain James Kirk?"

"Yes." Kirk looked surprised; he hadn't expected to be met.

"You are under arrest, sir. Will you come this way-" As he spoke, two security guards positioned themselves on either side of him.

"Arrest? What the hell is going on?" Kirk demanded at once.

"Please, sir. I have my orders."

Kirk shrugged. It was useless to argue; the lieutenant's superior would doubtless clear the whole thing up, and the sooner he got there the better.

"Very well, lieutenant. Lead on."

McCoy stared at Spock for several moments before he replied. "Okay, Spock, so what's the joke? I don't think it's very funny."

"Indeed, neither do I, Doctor."

"But you've just said..."

"I just said that Captain Kirk is under arrest, Doctor, on suspicion of espionage."

McCoy laughed loudly. "If Jim's a spy, I'm a Chinaman!"

"I do not see why the country of your birth should..." Spock began automatically.

"Forget it, Spock!" McCoy sat down heavily on the chair beside him. "Just tell me what it's all about."

"I wish I knew," the Vulcan admitted. "I know little more than that."

"What did they say exactly?"

"Exactly?" Spock steepled his fingers and began to recite. "I received a call from Admiral Reynolds' office to the effect that Captain Kirk is under arrest on suspicion of espionage. The Enterprise is to remain in orbit, and I am in temporary command."

"And didn't they tell you any more? Any details?" McCoy pressed.

"No. But it is only suspicion at the moment, Doctor. Formal charges, if any, will not be laid until the enquiry is complete."

"But it's so ridiculous!" the Doctor said angrily.

"Doctor, I do not believe Starfleet would go ahead unless they feel they have enough evidence."

"Evidence? Do you mean to believe this trumped up charge?" The blue eyes blazed angrily.

Spock stifled a sigh. "I did not say I believe it, Doctor, I said they must have evidence. It is only logical we wait to hear that evidence, is it not?"

"So when will we know all the details, then, Spock?"

"If they follow normal procedure there will be a thorough search made of the Captain's quarters here, and his belongings, first."

The Doctor humphed. "Okay, Spock. Let me know as soon as you hear anything, will you?"

"Of course." The door closed behind the Human.

Spock had not allowed his real shock to convey itself to McCoy. The Doctor

tended to worry where Jim was concerned anyway, without Spock fanning the flames. He sighed again, lightly, and looked around the familiar room. There was nothing more he could do here at the moment and he decided to return to his own quarters. It was not logical, he knew, but he never did feel 'right' being in Jim's cabin without his being present. He moved towards the door, and then his eye strayed for a moment to his friend's painting. As no-one was present to see, he allowed a gentle smile to soften his stern features. Impulsively he stepped closer and lifted the picture from the wall. It would be a pity if the Admiral's staff destroyed Jim's 'pride and joy' in their zeal. Tucking it under his arm, he returned to his own cabin and opening the desk drawer, slipped it inside. Then, not really knowing why he succumbed to the temptation, he patted the picture as he had seen Jim do so often during the last months. For luck, Jim, he thought briefly, and closed the drawer decisively.

Kirk stared once more around the near-empty room in which he had been placed to wait until the Commodore decided to see him. At first, surprise had given way to curiosity, and now he walked on the knife edge of anger. He glared uncompromisingly at the guards who finally came to fetch him. He hurried along the corridor so fast that his escort almost had to run to keep up. Once inside the Commodore's office his temper dissipated somewhat under the Andorian's icy gaze. Kirk saluted.

The Commodore pointed an almost languid finger towards a hard-backed chair. "You may sit, Captain."

"Thank you, sir." Kirk saw the two guards take up positions against the wall behind him.

The Commodore had begun to glance through the papers in front of him once more, practically ignoring the Human. Kirk tried not to shuffle his feet. This was, after all, standard interrogation procedure. Studied indifference followed by...stop! He drew himself up quickly. Interrogation? He didn't even know what he was accused of yet. His gaze shifted to the rather pimply ensign who was acting as the Commodore's secretary and would no doubt be making sure that the computer got a full and accurate account of this meeting. The youth was gazing out of the window, oblivious of his surroundings and picking his nose furiously. Kirk managed to stifle a snigger, dragging his gaze around the rest of the room and back to the Commodore, to find the steely eyes regarding him in turn. He snapped upright in his chair. "Sir?"

"...Yes. For the record, Captain, state your full name, rank and serial number." His loose dentures clicked as he spoke, and Kirk thought idly of the ridiculous things you noticed at times like this as he gave the required information.

"This is only an enquiry, you understand, Captain. No charges are being made - yet," the Commodore went on.

"Sir, what is the enquiry about?" Kirk asked. "No-one's told me yet."

"Mmmm. I see. You are being held on suspicion of espionage."

"Spying? Me? Is this someone's idea of a practical joke?" Kirk demanded.

The Commodore's face flushed navy as his expression hardened. "I would not call the slaughter of two hundred innocent colonists on Philidron, the murder of our agent and the killing of Prince Playa and god knows how many of his people, and whose death could well prolong the civil war on Lybra for countless years a joke, Captain."

Kirk stared at him in horror. "I never heard about the colony, sir... It was my decision to - "

"Exactly. In each case it was either your decision, or only you knew the details."

"You're not trying to say I'm responsible for all that?" Kirk gasped.

"You are accused of nothing yet, Captain." The Commodore looked up as the door opened and a yeoman brought in his midmorning refreshment. "Ah, good. Put it down there." Kirk noticed he was not offered anything. "Each of these assignments was top secret, Captain," the Commodore continued. "In each case, you - and only you - were aware of the purpose and destination of each mission. Yet each ended in disaster. One could be bad luck, two pure coincidence...but three? I'm sure you realise that is too much to expect even the most gullible man to accept - and I am not gullible, Kirk." He bit decisively into the large flat biscuit to emphasise his statement, and his loose denture clicked madly. Kirk felt a dreadful desire to scream with laughter, but managed to hold it back, realising that nerves more than anything else was causing it.

When he was finally taken back to the small waiting room, he felt completely drained. The Commodore had questioned and gone over every move he had made during the last few months, not once, but again and again...

It was not till the next day that Kirk was allowed to see anyone from the Enterprise, and he looked up in relief as the familiar blue shirt of his First Officer appeared through the door.

"Spock, come in, sit down!"

The lean figure obligingly folded itself into a chair. The dark eyes studied his young Captain keenly before he finally spoke. "Dr. McCoy sends his compliments, Captain and trusts that you are in good health." Noting Kirk's nod, he went on. "They would only allow one visitor." He looked almost apologetically. "We decided that I should come."

"I'm glad you did," Kirk interrupted quickly. Somehow as soon as he'd seen the stern features he'd felt a wave of relief flood over him. Spock was here. Everything was going to be fine. He smiled somewhat shakily. "Sorry I've nothing to offer you in the way of refreshment, Spock. It's not exactly home from home."

"Have they charged you yet, Captain?"

"No. Do you know what they think I've done?" Kirk asked quietly.

"Yes." The lean face was expressionless.

"What the hell am I going to do about it?" Kirk demanded.

"They have been searching your quarters on the Enterprise," Spock informed him.

"I guessed they would."

"They also took copies of the computer log entries for the past six months." He paused. "And your personal log."

"Damn!" Kirk grinned suddenly. "Good job my personal log isn't too personal!"

"Indeed," Spock agreed quietly. "I understand from the Commodore that they will be charging you formally this morning. They are awaiting confirmation from Starfleet Command."

Kirk shrugged. "I was hoping they wouldn't have enough evidence - I don't know of any."

"I understand it will be mainly circumstantial, sir."

"No smoke without fire, eh? God, I feel so damned helpless, Spock, stuck in here!"

"We will do all we can to refute the charges, sir." He had to stay formal.

"Yes, I know you will, Spock - all of you."

The Vulcan rose. "I will get a copy of the charges as soon as they are available. Dr. McCoy and I will study them."

"Good, do that."

Spock walked slowly to the door and hesitated, and Kirk smiled at the stiff back. "Spock - I am innocent, you know," he said softly.

The dark head turned, their eyes meeting for a heartbeat. "I never doubted it, Jim." The door closed behind him.

Another six hours dragged wearily by, and then Kirk was marched into the Commodore's office once more.

"You're a very lucky man, Captain."

"Lucky, sir?" His heart rose.

"Yes. You seem to have friends in high places. However, if I had been able to find any really hard evidence, and not just circumstantial, you wouldn't have got away with it - not if you were the Administrator himself! Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly," Kirk said harshly.

"Right. Just remember - we'll be watching you closely after this, Kirk. Dismissed."

Two minutes later Kirk was outside the main complex, and ten minutes after that he was back on the Enterprise.

As he left the transporter room with Kyle's "Welcome home!" still ringing in his ears, he almost collided with the Doctor.

"Jim, we've just heard the news. It's great!"

"Is it?" Kirk shook his fair head. "Got time for a drink, Bones?"

"Well, it's a bit early for me, but as it's a special occasion, you've twisted my arm. 'Sides, it isn't healthy to drink alone." They walked in companionable silence to Kirk's quarters, and he acknowledged smiles and words of welcome from the crew on the way. As the door closed behind them he sighed and pointed the Doctor to a chair. Turning, he poured out two drinks before he spoke.

"I'm not really cleared, Bones. The Commodore made that very clear. Someone spoke up for me, apparently, someone pretty high up, and as the only evidence they'd got was circumstantial..." He shrugged. "They had to let me go."

"Well, don't lose any sleep over it, Jim. It was ridiculous anyway."

"Was it? I thought so too, but I've had time to calm down since then and think. Look at it from their point of view. We take those colonists to Philidron. I get orders to decide a) leave them unprotected and pick up the agent, or b) abandon the agent and stay with the colonists... I got the orders, Doctor; I had to decide..."

"No-one's infallible, Jim. So you made a wrong decision for once; you've had to live with worse than that in the past."

"Maybe. But the area was clear of hostiles, Bones, or I wouldn't have gone - unless they were closer than we thought; perhaps hidden by the planet itself. Either way, the colony was attacked with the two supply ships only hours away; we know it must have been the Romulans, but dead men tell no tales, and they've no doubt got their own colony there now. The Agent is dead when we get there. And then Don asks me to take over his mission and gives me - me, Bones - the details, no-one else...and just before we arrive, someone brings a mountain down on top of the Prince and his men. Another coincidence?" He emptied his glass.

"Jim, stop torturing yourself. These things happen. You know that, and so do I - and more importantly, so does Starfleet Command." The blue eyes looked at him compassionately. "Stop blaming yourself, Captain."

The door buzzer interrupted them, and he glanced round as the First Officer walked in.

"I heard you had transported aboard, Captain. Mr. Sulu has the con; I came to return this."

Kirk smiled for the first time that day. "Spock, you saved it!"

"It seemed a pity to allow the Commodore's men to tear it to pieces in their zeal," he said softly, and walking to the appropriate wall, replaced it.

"Thank you, Mr. Spock. We were just having a drink - will you join us?" Kirk asked.

"I am not thirsty at the moment, sir, thank you."

"Spock, you don't have to be thirsty..." McCoy began, then shook his head, laughing out loud. "Hell, I give up, Spock!"

"I sincerely wish that you would, Doctor." Then, turning to Kirk, "With your permission, I will return to my duties."

"Yes, of course, Spock. Carry on, and thank you." The dark eyes glowed for a moment, and he left.

For the next week or so, they were back to star charting, and Kirk began to feel his mind more at ease, almost as if Starbase 6 had not occurred. Funny, he thought as he combed his hair, how quickly the Human brain can patch over the hurt, and make you forget so quickly events that hurt one's ego...like new skin over a wound. But he also knew he was starting to get edgy again too; after all, he hated inactivity, and at the back of his mind he could not help wondering if the Enterprise was being kept on routine work on purpose. He dismissed the idea at once. A Starship was too valuable a commodity for that. No, they'd get action soon enough...

Less than two hours later, he had cause to remember his prophesy when the Double A priority came in from Starfleet Command.

Taking the small message tape from Uhura he carried it down to his quarters to decode. Reaching for the small decoding machine in his safe, he ran the tape through, listening carefully. Then he made up his mind quickly. This time he would tell no-one of its contents - no-one at all. Then, if anything went wrong... He cut the thought at once; and activating the intercom, made the necessary course change.

The small outpost on Dunedin was devastated, the cluster of buildings and domes still smouldering. Spock looked up, his face expressionless. "There is no-one alive down here, Captain, save for ourselves." The Vulcan drew closer to Kirk's side. "The orders, sir - did they say the outpost was under seige?" he asked.

"No." Kirk shook his head, his face deathly pale. "No, Spock. I had to see Professor Simon Jones here. He had made some sort of discovery or breakthrough, I don't know what, but it was important enough to divert a Starship to fetch the Professor and his party. And this happens..."

"It seems someone else has beaten us to it, Captain."

"Again," Kirk said softly, then looked around shaking his head. "I'm going back to the ship, Spock. I can't do any more here. Let me know if you find anything."

Forty-eight hours later, they were still orbiting Dunedin awaiting a reply to the priority message Kirk had sent to H.Q. He used the time to catch up on some routine paperwork that always seemed to accumulate on his desk, and was therefore engrossed when the door buzzed and Spock came in, looking more stiff and formal than ever.

"Hi, Spock, what can I do for you?" He didn't attempt a smile. "Take a pew."

"I would rather not sit at the moment."

"Okay, suit yourself. What's up?"

The Vulcan knew there was no way he could soften this for the Human. "We have just received a communication from Starfleet Command, sir."

"We did? Good. Why wasn't I informed?"

"The communication was for me, sir."

"You? I don't,..."

"Please, Captain." Spock paused. "I am ordered to relieve you of command and to return to Starbase 6 at once."

"Relieve me? Why?" Kirk looked confused, then his face cleared. "Of course - Dunedin. I should have expected it, I suppose. No-one knew of the Professor's discovery, only me. Only me, Spock. But I swear I told no-one, no-one at all. Hell, what's going on around here?"

Spock desperately wished he could supply the answer.

Kirk stood and began to stride up and down the small space, then stopped. "Are you going to put me in the brig, Spock?" he asked quietly, "or just confine me to my quarters?"

"I do not believe the brig is necessary, Captain, nor do I intend to confine you to your quarters, but you are relieved of duty. I am sorry."

Kirk's shoulders slumped. "Yeah. Okay, Spock, don't worry. I won't do anything I shouldn't." Then a wry smile crossed his face and he reached out to pat the painting intimately. "It doesn't bring much luck, does it?"

Spock returned to his quarters, ordered their return to Starbase and left Sulu at the con.

He sat down quietly in front of the firepot and began to meditate. His friend was in grave trouble, and there seemed little he could do to help. Random factors had conspired to...he stopped. Random factors! Humans believed in luck. Lucky charms, lucky days, lucky numbers...and of course, Jim's painting, not really lucky, but... Most of Jim's troubles seemed to stem from when it came on board. He had to take a closer look at that painting. Rising elegantly to his feet, he made his way to sickbay.

"I've only just left him, Spock. I went to see him right after you told him of Starfleet's order. He's sleeping now. I gave him a shot; it'll keep him out for twelve hours, with any luck."

"Good. It is necessary I search the Captain's quarters."

"Search his...? You don't believe all those lies about Jim, do you, Spock?" McCoy asked.

"Of course not, Doctor, but Jim could have given the information away inadvertently."

"Inadvertently? How? They took his room apart with a fine tooth comb at Starbase 6, Spock - I saw them do it."

"I know that, Doctor. However, I do not believe they knew where to look, and even if they had known, it would have been impossible for them to find it."

"Spock, you're doing it again," McCoy said. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Please, bear with me. If I am correct, you will know soon enough. If not..." He shrugged openly, to the Doctor's surprise, and left the room.

Spock lifted the painting from the wall and placed it carefully on the desk...

Kirk opened his eyes slowly. They felt stuck together and his mouth tasted like the inside of a parrot's cage. Hell, he could sometimes sympathise with Spock - McCoy's potions were obnoxious! He stumbled into the bathroom, took a quick shower and cleaned his teeth vigorously.

The first thing he saw when he returned to his day cabin was the Vulcan sitting at his desk, his fingers steepled, obviously deep in thought.

"Spock?" he said tentatively, and moved across the room. "Mr. Spock?"

The dark eyes looked up. "Captain. I apologise for waiting here without permission, but I wanted to see you as soon as you woke up."

"That's okay, Spock, I..." He stopped as his eyes fell on the desk in front of the Vulcan, and the amber eyes widened as he pointed incredulously. "Spock! What the hell do you think you're doing? That's my property - you've ...you've ruined it!"

"It was necessary, Captain. I am sorry."

"Necessary? That was a work of art, Spock. Look at it now!"

The door buzzed. "Come." Kirk spoke without looking round.

McCoy walked in. "You're awake. I thought it was about time. Hi, Spock, what..." His voice trailed off as he too looked at the ruined painting. "Who did that?" he asked.

"I did, Doctor. Please, gentlemen, would you both sit down?"

The two Humans obliged, and Kirk opened his mouth twice, thought better of what he was going to say, finally managing, "Errolain, Spock."

"Yes, sir." He paused, then went on. "It was you who made me realise, Captain."

"Me? Realise?"

"Yes. You said, I believe, 'it didn't bring me much luck' - referring to the painting. I began to think, and realised that all the trouble started when the painting came on board. I wondered if a transmitting device could have been hidden in the frame..."

"A bug?"

"Precisely, Captain. I found nothing. Not in the frame itself... However, we all know that a new process has been used here to give a tri-dimensional effect in painting, that previously has only been achieved in holographs..."

"Quit the lecture, Spock, we all know that. Just get on with it," McCoy grumbled.

"Very well. I discovered a miniaturized device - just here." He picked up what appeared to be a Sherlock Holmes type magnifying glass. The Doctor wondered where he'd got that from, and decided the wardrobe section of Stores had probably supplied it. But Spock had now got hold of a tiny probe and was pointing to the painting. The two Humans leaned forward as the Vulcan, with the precision of a surgeon, lifted up a strategic part of the Human's anatomy. "As you will see, gentlemen, the paint has been layered here...ahhh...there we are..." He pointed to a tiny dot no bigger than a pin head. "I think Mr. Scott will find that this is our 'leak'," he said blandly.

"Leak being the operative word, Spock," McCoy chuckled. "I never realised Romulans had such a sense of humour. What a place to put it!"

"Yes, I guess the Romulans are to blame, it's their type of trick," Kirk conceded.

"Indeed." Spock picked up the painting carefully. "With your permission, Captain, I will take this down to Mr. Scott."

"Yes, of course, Spock - and thanks."

As the door closed behind the First Officer, Kirk sank down into the chair behind his desk. "You know, Bones, the Romulans always say we Humans are all mouth and trousers... I wonder if they were trying to tell us something?" and they both laughed together, from sheer relief.

They all made full reports at Starbase 6 and the evidence was beamed down. Kirk heard that Jason was being brought in for questioning, but it was expected that they would find he had been used, and would remember nothing at all about it.

As the Starbase faded behind them, Kirk filled three glasses and handed one to McCoy. "Spock will be here in a minute," and he smiled as the door opened to admit the Vulcan. "I've put your drink over there, Spock."

"Thank you, Captain."

They all sipped in silence, each with his own thoughts for a moment. Kirk broke the silence at last. "You know, my only regret now is that I haven't got that painting to look at. I got quite attached to it...you'd be surprised how it inspired me!" He winked lecherously at the Doctor.

"Yes, I'd certainly say it was 'inspiring'," McCoy agreed. "Wouldn't you say it was inspiring, Mr. Spock?"

"Not 'inspiring', exactly, Doctor."

"Fascinating, then?" McCoy pressed.

"No, Doctor...merely interesting," he replied, and Kirk chuckled.

"However you both define it - I'm going to miss it," he said and poured out another drink for the Doctor and himself, Spock declining with a shake of the head. The Vulcan stood. ...

"I have to return to the bridge. However..." He looked suddenly uncomfortable as he lifted a parcel from the floor where he had placed it by his feet, "I would like you to accept this, Captain...a replacement for the one I had to destroy." He put the package down and pushed it across the desk and then retreated to the door.

"Well, thank you, Mr. Spock." Kirk picked it up, slightly surprised and pleased.

"I hope you find it satisfactory, sir." An eyebrow rose as he met McCoy's blue eyes. "That is what I would term 'inspiring', Doctor," he said and the door closed behind him.

"Well, go on, Jim. open it!"

Kirk opened a drawer and reached for a knife to cut the string. "Feels like Christmas," he joked.

"It's a painting, that's for sure, but knowing Spock, it'll be something uplifting like...oh, the Vulcan Academy of Science, or T'Pol in full regalia, or..."

"Shut up, Bones," Kirk laughed. "Whatever it is, I'll..." He stopped and whistled loudly. "Get a load of that, Doctor!" He held up the painting, and McCoy's eyes popped.

"My god - and we thought Jason's was erotic! What's it painted on - asbestos?"

"Don't know - but if I'm not mistaken, that's pre-Reform Vulcan art...from Warrior times." He cleared his throat. "I...er...I think we're going to have to alter our opinion of our First Officer, Bones."

McCoy's appreciative gaze never left the picture as he murmured, "And some, Jim...and some!"

AMOR, ERGO SUM by Meg Wright

(I Am Loved, Therefore I am...)

My conception was logical; I would like to believe
 It was also an act of love, but I cannot be sure,
 For the process of creation is never a simple matter.
 Undoubtedly, it was important for the future good
 Of sentient beings that they should see mankind and alien
 Can live together; that it is perfectly possible
 For a half-breed to survive the multiplicity
 Of pressures that must be the lot of every hybrid child.

Plenty were ready to scoff at the very idea,
 To mock the ideals that had given me birth;
 To demand that I be condemned to a decent obscurity,
 As my existence was an offence to rational beings.
 In addition, of course, there are always those
 To whom an act of love between two creatures
 Of un-common kinds, whether of breed, gender or religion,
 Is an obscenity; whereas violence and casual slaughter
 In war, for 'freedom' or 'ideals' may be praised and applauded;
 To them, my innocent life was particularly distasteful
 And not to be thought of. Prejudice dies hard.
 After all - would you let your sister marry one?

Equally unsuitable to closed minds, was the 'sister'
 Who had a mind of her own. She stood no chance.
 And so, from the earliest days of my life there were jibes
 Concerning any part of me that did not fit
 Into the accepted mould of those in authority,
 Who knew what was right, what was proper and decent.
 Later there was a change, for a while, when it was seen
 That I, rejected and despised, had now become
 Something of a legend, finding wide-spread favour,
 In spite of my undoubted deficiencies, such as
 The 'wrong-shaped' ears, and a disconcerting tendency
 To make mankind take a second look at what they are
 And what they stand for. Indeed, it was perfectly possible
 My popularity stemmed precisely from these things.
 Immediately, those who were once in full-cry against me
 Abruptly changed their minds, for they quickly saw
 That they might use me for their present good.

All my life I have been pulled two ways, and I exist
 In a tangled web of logic and emotion, tolerated and disliked,
 Adored and set aside; and, as far as my inner life was ever revealed
 It showed itself as a fervent stoicism or a phlegmatic excitement.
 Whatever the problem, it seemed there would be dichotomy
 For me; and for those who were destined to share in my life.

But, having been brought into the world I cannot be ignored.
 Or set aside; I have been given the precious gift of life,
 And I will live it out in one way or another.
 I am tenacious and I cling, in spite of every effort
 To shake me free and consign me to oblivion.

I live in the hearts of large numbers of those who care
 For the things I stand for - peace and the beauty of difference;
 Loyalty to others and compassion; a need to see and understand
 Another's point of view and contentedly agree to differ.

In an infinite universe there is an infinity
 Of dimensional possibilities, and though I die in one,
 In others I will live. In this world as you know, the problems

Created by my dual heritage were unresolved;
 In other worlds it may be different and I will find peace.
 One fact remains; I will not die. For I was born
 Out of the fire of one man's dreams, and I caught
 At the imagination of a myriad more like-minded dreamers.
 This being so I will live on, even if my 'death'
 Is given visual form. Consider, if you will, one last
 Logical statement. Existing as I do, only in the minds
 Of those that love me, I can never die.
 I am loved, therefore I am.

THE PLACE OF CHALLENGE by Sheryl Peterson

"Are Thee Vulcan - or are Thee Human?"

My words slash at thee like the blade of the lirpa which awaits thy hand.
 My voice is harsh as the winds of Gol - and as pitiless. But I must know. Now
 of all times - I must know.

Thou art Spock, returned to us from afar. The legend of thy race, the
 pride of thy people, though thou art half-Human by the blood of thy mother
 Amanda, the chosen of Sarek. Yet she is one with us, as are thee. Dost thou
 turn from us now? My eyes pierce thee as thou standest before me, quivering
 with the strength of thy control, as the Plak Tow binds thee in its thrall.

Yet thou dost speak...

Though thy words are wrung from thy lips like the drawing of a blade from
 a wound...yet still thou dost speak?

How can this be?

Thine eyes are aflame with fever. Thy blood burns with the Pon Farr that
 has brought thee here, to the place of thy fathers, to claim T'Pring, thy
 bondmate. As it was in the beginning, so dost Vulcan claim thee now, and brand
 thee Vulcan forever by the Bondage of thy blood.

But there is another bondage...

I had thought I did sense it when I touched thy mind, when first thou
 greeted me as thy Liege, but I was not sure...then. These Outworlders thou hast
 brought to stand with thee, Spock, in the place of honour...what manner of men
 are they, that thou dared my anger to have them beside thee, in this, thy time
 of trial? To witness thy dread weakness...to answer with thy life for their
 conduct.

Now T'Pring has chosen one...for her champion!

A strange choice indeed - for one who scorns thee because thy blood is not
 pure. Yet it must stand...it is the law of Kalifar. He and thou must fight for
 the maid, with lirpa and ahn woon - till one is dead.

And thy friend - he who is thy Captain - shall fight thee. He has so
 agreed...for reasons only he can know.

But what is this?

Thou stirrest from the Plak Tow, from the depths of which no Vulcan ever
 spoke. Yet thou dost speak - to beg for the life of the Outworlder who is thy
 Captain! How can this be? And what is thy bond to him that fear for his life
 can break the chains Vulcan has placed upon thee, by the fever in thy blood?
 I tremble to look upon thee, Spock, as thou dost speak...and beg that I free the
 Outworlder from the challenge!

Thou - a Vulcan! Of the line of blood five thousand years pure.

Yet thee dare to do this? To throw aside the traditions of thy fathers -

for love of a stranger not even of our world or our ways?

It shall not be! I, T'Pau, forbid it!

Thou shall not be snatched back into the nothingness that, to us, is Space. The fathers and thy blood have called thee home... Thy duty must bind thee here, to us, forever, and no Outworlder may step between thee and thy place - though he must be sacrificed in the place of thy fathers, with his blood on thy hands.

I refuse thy pleas, Spock!

Thou claim thou art Vulcan...thy blood proclaims it!

Now thou must fight to prove thou art fit to take thy place! The light of thy eyes dies at my words, and thy face closes once more into a mask of stone. The strangers look on in dismay as thou dost step back, without another word, to be lost once more in the madness of the Plak Tow, denying them.

The time of thy greatest trial is yet now at hand, Spock.

When this is over, and he who is thy Captain lies dead on the sand... I shall grieve with thee, at the loss of thy friend.

But now I am T'Pau.

I am Vulcan...as art thou, Spock. And we must pay the price our blood demands of us.

It is time.

My face is stone...my voice as implacable as the desert winds of Vulcan itself, as I raise it over the trembling bells to chant the age-old ritual, and to order - "Bring first the limpas."

Fight well, my Spock.

With thee fights Vulcan...though I dare not tell thee.

THE EVERLASTING DREAM by Karen Hayden

It is the everlasting dream
That all beings may become equal,
That each and every sect and breed
Can one day stand astride, with common goals
In existence.

You see a being's skin a different hue become,
As continent and planet is traversed.
Throughout the galaxy - differences,
That which should be rejoiced...
And yet - resulting subjugation.

And all because those who are different
Are alienated within their own race.
Never acceptance without strife...
Those who are discriminated against
End up as the capitulated minority.

Always one question - Why?
Why cannot each being treat one another as brother?
Why not acceptance in spite of difference
Instead of the opposition so inevitable
By the capricious few?

History is full of dreams
 Which become reality because of the few who believed.
 We must continue to lead the way, in IDIC.
 I must show those in ignorance what I have learned.
 And hope that others will follow my example...

It is the only logical way...

GOLDEN SOUL by Karen Hayden

I stepped through the door
 Into what had been.
 The past in all its glory,
 A part of history, became
 A page in all the history books proclaimed.

Historic 'hero' who led his people
 Well into the realms of peace and power.
 New lives - contented souls,
 Accepting what was destined
 For them - and for their leader.

Familiarity. Golden hair, handsome features.
 And eyes which told what words could not.
 The hazel depths which told me
 That the spirit I sought
Was here.

His name was Alexander.
 Exceptional leader, sensitive man of countless facets - exactly
 as that other.

And I became well known to him, within my new body,
 As Hephaistion, he who was known as brother,
 As he whom Alexander proclaimed was as he himself.

'The Great' believed Hephaistion to be a part of himself,
 And I believe that Jim Kirk felt that too, of me.
 ...Yet neither of us could openly proclaim it then.
 Now, instead, all can be as it could not be before.
 And I have reason to live again.

I find here a different form of closeness,
 A relationship that could not have been, before -
 But there is no regret, only acceptance - I simply dream of what
 might have been.

I am at his side, protecting, helping, just as before.
 And I am grateful that I have been given another chance to live.

Now my search is ended.
 Death took the other half of me, so many years ago,
 But now, in history, I find the golden spirit again.
 This could have been him in another reality.
 A different name, perhaps. But the soul - the same.

Sleep well, my Captain, with your mistress Enterprise.
 Be happy in what you have, and understand.
 I could not have lived without you - there.
 Yet here I have found you once more...
 A leader. A man of men. Unique. And I follow you, stand with you.
 Until my search begins again...

THE DEMON IN THE DESERT by Sheila Clark

The bitter struggle for possession of the Holy City and the barren, infertile desert that surrounded it had lasted for many years, both sides stubbornly determined to possess the squalid, disease-ridden streets where two different Holy Men had once walked, centuries before. That both men had been of the same religion mattered nothing to the fanatical followers of the two cults, divided though they were by nothing more than a few minor procedures in worship mostly introduced in the centuries since the Holy Men walked the Earth; a few minor differences caused by different interpretations of the often ambiguous preaching of the two men.

And then the War was abruptly halted by the sudden appearance of the Enemy. Green-skinned, with strange pointed ears, the strangers were clearly Demons from Hell.

For a few brief days there was a general unspoken and uneasy truce as each side debated whether to accept the Demons as allies to defeat the heretical followers of the other sect; both sets of leaders decided that such allies would be uncertain, possibly treacherous, and hastily contacted their erstwhile opponents. An alliance was speedily formed; although based only on mutual self-interest, the forces of civilised Earth combined for the first time ever to combat a common enemy.

Yet there was nothing to combat.

There was no quick way to defeat the Demons. It proved impossible to meet them in battle; they refused to fight, and the men of Earth quickly discovered that the Demons and their camp were impossible to approach; an invisible barrier through which no Man could pass surrounded the Enemy, proof indeed of their demonic origins.

More Demons arrived daily, though no Man could see from whence they came or how they arrived. The Enemy camp expanded, and with it the invisible barrier. A Man meeting the barrier was not hurt even by the impact that halted him; it seemed to give with him momentarily, then firm; thereafter, it was like trying to walk through a wall. Then strange buildings began to appear, built as if by magic, overnight. The Men watched, puzzled; they waited, at first alert for the onslaught of these fiends from Hell - the onslaught that must surely come.

None came.

The Demons ignored the Men who watched their camp as completely as if they did not exist.

Years passed.

The original uneasy truce was extended; few, even among the most fanatical, cared to recommence hostilities with the outpost of Hell so close. Many minor leaders on both sides returned home with their men, trusting that they would be summoned back if it became necessary - what point in wasting one's life guarding a city against Demons who showed no interest in the affairs of Men? Some more important leaders went home too, in many cases leaving a small group of their men commanded by one of their sons - in many cases, an heir who showed more anxiety to take on the responsibilities of the family estate than his father thought fitting.

More years passed. The truce was now permanent; the religious differences recognised as the trivialities that they were, both sides now worked together. Trade flourished; men prospered. But the Demons were still there.

Few Men now stayed to watch and guard save those assigned to do so by their government. Although the Demons still ignored the world of Men, seemingly content to remain within the cramped environs of their settlement, nobody was so lost to reason as deny that a watch was necessary; Demons were capricious creatures, after all. Even the Holy City was deserted now, its mud-walled buildings eroding

into ruins save where the military maintained some of the larger buildings as barracks - nobody cared to live so near the Demon camp, for even although they ignored Man completely, their presence nearby created nervousness - and in addition, a handful of people, mostly children, had vanished in the desert in the years immediately following the Demons' arrival, and who could say that they had not been captured, spirited off into Hell? Nobody seemed to remember that children had sometimes disappeared into the desert long before the Demons came.

Sir James de Kirkhold gazed gloomily out from the small unglazed window of his tiny, airless office towards the Demon camp, subconsciously noting the steady activity there, little though he understood its purpose. He knew full well that it was his own fault that he was here commanding the small and dispirited garrison that purported to watch the Demons, but even after three months he still did not regret the angry outburst that told King's Secretary Baris exactly what his underlings thought of his self-important incompetence. Perhaps he might begin to regret it in time - he had no illusions about the length of Baris' memory or the petty vindictiveness of the man. Sir James did not subscribe to the nearly outmoded belief so prevalent in his father's time that only the nobly born should hold positions of importance, but Baris was certainly no recommendation for the promotion of those of more lowly birth.

He sighed. There was absolutely nothing to do in this desert waste, and he wondered more and more just what had caused people to settle here, build a city here, continue to live here for centuries. Granted, there was evidence that the land had once been more fertile; the wind occasionally blew enough sand away to disclose tree stumps, dead now but proof of adequate rainfall in the distant past. Sir James knew well the desirability of keeping his men's spirits high, but the dry, enervating heat made it impossible to keep their morale up by holding tournaments. There were not even animals to hunt in this godforsaken wilderness.

There seemed to be nothing he could do to encourage his men, selected as they were from among the least useful elements of the cadets - an army was no longer needed, of course, although military training was given to every young man. Who knew when the Demons might decide to attack? This was one of the duties assigned as part of the training, but enthusiastic and capable men were unlikely to be wasted here. The general opinion was that if the Demons were going to attack, they would have done so long ago. And although his conscientiousness would not permit him to neglect the watch, at heart Sir James agreed. The Demons did indeed appear to be supremely unconscious of their presence.

But today he felt restless, longing for action - something, anything. Summoning Pavel, the young page whose grandfather had fought against Sir James' and who would have been horrified to see his grandson as page to one of the heretics, he called for his horse, thanking his guardian angel that he had at least been able to bring his own page.

After a short pause, Pavel returned to announce that the horse was ready; Sir James left his office with a tiny sigh of relief.

The horse waited dispiritedly, its head drooping wearily, its dank coat dull and lifeless in spite of all Pavel's grooming. Its ribs showed clearly, and Sir James shook his head. If any of his horses had been turned out like this, he would have had the hide off the back of whatever careless groom was responsible; here, he knew, he could expect nothing better. The enervating heat took the heart out of beast as well as man. All supplies had to be brought in, and although by tradition the commanding officer must have a horse, little space could be spared in the supply train for fodder. The poor animal was existing on a starvation diet, and when it died, a fresh nag could be requisitioned...to starve to death in its turn. Sir James knew that this garrison would never be supplied with decent horseflesh. This one had the breeding of a hawker's crock, but it was at least willing...

Sir James mounted, and could have sworn he heard the horse give a weary and resigned sigh. He checked the water bottle fastened to the saddle even though he

was confident that Pavel had seen that it was full; he had quickly learned that in the desert a man had only himself to blame if anything went wrong.

He set off at a steady walk, thinking longingly of the easy crater of his favourite steed back home - but he could not have brought Star here. Bad enough that a mongrel horse should die in this hellhole - to waste the life of a valuable stallion would be criminal.

Deliberately, he selected a route that would take him past the Demon's encampment. He did not expect to see anything of value, so he was not disappointed when he saw nothing. Then, duty done, he spurred the horse to the slow and uncomfortable jog that was the nearest it could manage to a trot. Soon encampment and city were a blur in the distance.

Sir James could not have said that he was enjoying himself, but at least he could relax out here and for the moment give himself up to the illusion that he was a free agent. Damn Baris, anyway. Self-important, incompetent fool.

There was even a wind blowing. True, it was a warm breeze when he would have given anything for a cooling blast from the north, but the movement of air was welcome.

And then his horse stumbled and went down. Sir James, caught almost unaware, let himself be thrown rather than risk being rolled on. Then he picked himself up and looked at the fallen horse. It lay still. Quickly he checked it.

Dead.

Damn! He had come five miles - at least. Possibly six. It would be an uncomfortable walk in this heat. Should he wait till dark? The moon was a little more than half - her light would be sufficient to let him see his way.

He looked back towards the city and drew his breath in sharply.

He could no longer see it. The breeze, light though it was, was blowing sand along with it. And...it was stronger than it had been. He could only hope that there was not to be a fully-fledged sandstorm.

Taking the water flask from the saddle, Sir James fastened it to his belt, glad that he had barely touched its contents so far. Then he set off back the way he had come, unable to walk as briskly as he would have liked for the soft dry sand that hampered his feet. He estimated that the walk would take him at least three hours.

He decided that even the boredom of the camp was preferable.

Within half an hour, he could no longer fool himself. The wind was gaining strength by the minute; soon he must find shelter or die, and where in this benighted desert could he find shelter? He was not even sure that he was still following a direct line back to the old city.

Then, a little to his right, he noticed a splash of colour. Blue. A deep, rich blue.

In this desert?

Curious, he altered direction fractionally and headed for the patch of colour. It was barely ten yards away, but the wind-blown sand was now so thick that it was not until he was almost on top of it that he realised that a body lay there, on its side, curled into a ball, head covered by a fold in the blue clothes. The clothing itself - a loose robe-like garment - was unfamiliar in style, as far as he could see, yet it was strangely familiar too.

Who could it be? Not one of his people, surely. Bending, he touched the body - and it moved. The concealing cloth was pulled from the head and the stranger looked up at him. He stiffened.

He was looking at the green skin, slanting eyebrows and pointed ears of a Demon.

The Demon looked at him; all it could see of him was his eyes, as they stared from above the strip of cloth he had wound protectively around his nose and mouth some time before, and its eyebrows lifted.

A Demon... Sir James shivered in superstitious fear, then common sense came to his aid. If the Demon had any powers at all, it would not be out here in a threatening sandstorm, apparently waiting to die. Hesitantly, he reached out his water flask. "Do you need water?" he asked hoarsely.

Without taking its eyes from him, the Demon accepted the flask and took a mouthful of water, then returned the flask. "I thank you," it said. The voice deep, quiet.

"You'll die if you stay here," Sir James said, conscious even as he spoke of the unnecessary nature of his remark. The Demon must surely know that.

"Yes," it replied. "But I have injured my ankle; I cannot walk unaided."

It was a Demon; an enemy. If it died, that would be one less to threaten his people...

"Can you walk if I help you?" Sir James could not have explained why he permitted his heart to overrule his head; he only knew that if he abandoned the Demon, he would for ever be ashamed, even though only he knew about it.

"I can try."

Sir James, still slightly nervously, helped the Demon to stand. It was perhaps an inch taller than he. "There are rocks over there," the Demon said, indicating. "We may find shelter among them. Without it, we shall surely die."

They made their slow way across the sand. It was perhaps a hundred yards to the rocky outcrop; it seemed like a hundred miles. Among the rocks they were partly shielded from the wind, and it took only a few minutes to find a shelter of sorts; the wind had blown a small 'cave' in the sand under a boulder at some time in the past, and the present wind was eddying around the boulder in such a way as to leave a gap between the rock and the nearby sand dune. They clambered into the hollow, finding themselves in an oasis of windless calm, although the sound of the wind still echoed in their ears.

They huddled together. There was barely room enough for one, yet it must shelter both. Sir James offered his companion the flask once more.

This time the Demon shook his head. "We should drink sparingly," he said as Sir James made to remove the cap. "Fortunately, my people are accustomed to a hot climate, and so we require less water than your people do."

Of course. Noplace could be hotter than Hell.

There was a brief pause, then the Demon went on. "My name is Spock."

Sir James swallowed. In face of this self introduction, how could he avoid giving the Demon his name? Yet if he did, the Demon would have power over him... He thought quickly.

Ah.

"My...my friends call me Jim." No need to mention that nobody now used that old childhood name.

Almost, the Demon Spock seemed to smile. "Are you so afraid of me that you hide your full name from me? No, you need not answer that. I know your people consider mine to be demons. But...when you aided me...I had hoped that at last one of us had found someone intelligent enough not to be blinded by ancient superstitions."

Sir James thought that over. Finally he said, "Most of us do agree that if you...your people...had wanted to, they could have overrun us long ago. But there is a world of difference between believing that...and ignoring the teachings of the Church with regard to the habits of Demons, when you are faced with...with..."

"With an alien who resembles these mythical beings," Spock concluded. "Does your Church have any proof - any proof at all - of the existence of Hell and its denizens?"

"Faith..." Sir James began.

"...Is a useful word for those trying to trick others into believing in something for which there is no logical explanation and which reason would otherwise reject," Spock said quietly.

"Fear of the unknown is instinctive," Sir James began slowly.

"True. But there is a big difference between being wary of something you encounter for the first time...and deliberately inventing terrors, which your Earth religions appear to do, to frighten people into adherence to a church, the main purpose of which appears - to us - to be to keep your population in fear so that they will continue to support in affluence a small group who do no useful work for the community, whose only reason for existence seems to be to continue to invent terrors so that the people will continue to support them so that they can invent more terrors...need I go on?"

"There are some...abuses of the Church's position, I agree," Sir James conceded. "But many priests live in poverty, devoting their lives to helping others."

"They are as cozened by the system as everyone else," Spock replied. "Do not misunderstand me, Jim; we respect your belief in a deity - indeed, we share your belief in a deity, even though the existence of such a Being cannot be proved logically. We do not - cannot - respect the way in which your religious leaders operate. To us, a man's beliefs are his own affair, and the responsibility of nobody except his parents, whose duty it is to introduce their children to the concept of god. It is not logical for the general population to be impoverished so that a handful of men can pretend to a capability they do not have. You are a leader of men, Jim - would you respect or seriously consider the plea of one of your followers who did not have the honesty to approach you himself but made his appeal through someone else - especially someone whose only authority in the matter was self-selection, and who in fact was unable or unwilling to do anything else?"

"Put like that... No, I don't suppose I would." Sir James hesitated again, then said suspiciously, "But how do you know how our religion works, if you are not...what you seem?"

This time Spock did smile, though briefly. "My mother was one of your people. A girl-child who wandered into the desert while Men still lived in the city. She would have died had we not found her; but then we kept her, as we had kept other lost children, to discover as much about your people as we could. Most of them settled among us perfectly happily."

"You wouldn't learn much about us from young children."

"No. But adults rarely got lost as the children did."

A sudden eddy of wind blew sand into their faces, reminding them that the safety of their tiny shelter might be illusory. Sir James coughed as the sand irritated his throat, and groped for the water bottle. Spock caught his hand.

"Wait, Jim - you may need the water more urgently yet."

Sir James looked into the alien eyes and in that instant forgot the lingering remnants of his superstitious fear of the 'Demons'. He could not remember ever seeing such gentleness in the eyes of any of his own people; he could not imagine seeing such warmth in the eyes of any of his own people.

"I wish...I wish we were not on opposite sides," he said sadly.

"Indeed; in a different reality, I could have called you friend." Their eyes met again, acknowledging the mysterious and inexplicable attraction that both men felt drawing them together.

"Why not?" Sir James said suddenly. "Why should we not be friends? Why

should your people and mine not be friends?"

Spock smiled at the other's enthusiasm. "Indeed, we would be happy to meet with your people as friends. But your people fear mine, remember."

"Yes... Spock?"

"Yes, Jim?"

"Why are you here?"

"Your world contains certain minerals - " he broke off, seeing the sudden incomprehension in Sir James' face. "Metals," he amended. "We need certain of these, but our world is sparsely provided with them, while your world is rich in them. We have no intention of stripping your world of its resources, Jim; you will need them yourselves one day. We are mining only this one desert area where few of your people live."

"I see - I think." Sir James could understand people wanting metal. "But where do you come from?"

"Another world. Forgive me, my friend; your people do not yet have the knowledge that would let you understand a more detailed explanation."

"But where is this other world, if it is not Hell? And how did you get here?"

Spock shook his head. "You do not have the technology to understand."

"I can try."

"You have seen the stars on a clear night." Although it was not a question, Sir James nodded. "Each of these stars is a sun - yes, I know. The stars look tiny because they are so far away."

"It has been theorised. But the Church says such a thought is heresy."

"It is truth. Many of these suns have worlds circling them, and on these worlds, other people live."

"The Sun..." Sir James began. He hesitated, then went on. "The Church says the Sun circles the Earth."

"Not so. Your Earth is one of ten planets that travel round your Sun - though you cannot see them all. You see, Jim? Your knowledge is limited by a Church so jealous of its position that it rejects any teaching contrary to its outdated beliefs. There is so much that we could teach you, but we dare not. Your people will learn, one day, but they must learn at their own speed. We could give you technology, but to your people it would be as magic."

"And your people came here by...by technology, so that mine think of you as Demons who come by magic?"

"Exactly." If Spock was surprised by the speed of the Human's understanding, he gave no sign.

Sir James nodded. "The Church would oppose you. Our Holy Book tells us everything we need to know...or so the Church says. It is evil to seek to know more - and the Devil is quick to tempt the curious. Yet I find myself wondering...there must have been a time before the Holy Book was written down, a time when men were ignorant of its teaching; a time when pagan religion flourished. What if their Holy Men also said that new learning was evil?"

"You have the insight to see that to adhere to these tenets is to invite stagnation," Spock said.

"Today's youth is restless, ready for a change," Sir James commented. "But to defy the Church is to invite death - slow and unpleasant."

There was a brief silence, broken only by the steady swish of sand blowing across the surface of the desert. The wind itself was strangely silent, to Sir James' mind; it took an effort to remember that much of the noise of wind was caused by the object through or over which it blew.

He shifted position slightly, and Spock moved with him. They wriggled into a more comfortable position. He closed his eyes for a moment; when he opened them it was dark, and utterly silent. He moved, trying to look round. Beside him a deep voice said, "You slept. It is now night. The wind has dropped, but the sky is overcast. There is neither moonlight nor starlight to guide us."

Memory connected. "My people may look for me in the morning."

"But you do not entirely believe so?"

"They're a demoralised lot."

"We...had noticed. However, there has been some improvement in the last few weeks. I think they may look for you where they would not have bothered searching for their previous commander."

"You've watched us pretty closely if you can say that. We thought you - your people - paid no attention to us."

"We do not watch, exactly - but we notice things. It is, after all, wise to be aware of your neighbours if they are hostile to you. Recently, your people have been more active; exercised more; their weapons shine more brightly when they reflect the sunshine. It is logical to assume a change of commander; a new commander who has not yet himself become demoralised."

Sir James laughed bitterly. "My men are the useless ones; the lazy, the careless, shuffled out here where they can do no harm. The commander... Well, I'm here because I insulted a petty official. A jumped-up little incompetent with delusions of grandeur, and enough influence to have me moved. I imagine the other commanders have been in much the same position. I'm here until another petty official has his corns trod on."

Spock looked puzzled. "Corns?"

"A figure of speech. Feels himself insulted."

"Ah. But you are not yet...sufficiently chastened by your punishment?"

"I'd do it again tomorrow."

They fell silent again. Light began to streak the sky; slowly, reluctantly, the darkness retreated. The sky was still grey with clouds, but here and there a glimpse of blue showed; in another hour it would be hot, dry...

Sir James offered Spock the water once more. The alien, this time, took another mouthful. Sir James also drank, then shook the bottle. "It should last," he said.

"It should," Spock agreed.

They scrambled out of the hollow, struggling upright in the narrow gap between rock and sand. They could barely see over the great drift of sand that had protected them from the main force of the storm. In the distance, but not in the direction Sir James had expected, they could see the city and the Demon - no, not Demon; alien - camp.

"How's your ankle?" he asked abruptly, remembering it.

"Painful," Spock conceded. "I can walk, however, if you assist me."

It took them some minutes to clamber out of the hole that had protected them. The sand was softer than it had been; their feet sank into it, making progress slow. At one point Sir James considered leaving his companion and going on alone for help; but he suspected that the Demons would ignore him, his own men think him mad - and his own obstinacy rejected the idea anyway.

The clouds had long dispersed; the sun beat down now, heating the air; the exertion of walking made him sweat, even without the strain of half carrying his companion. Spock had taken no more water, but even so the flask was almost empty.

Voices...

They stopped. Looked up.

Five men, Pavel at their head; the surgeon another.

"Sir, what happened?"

Sir James half smiled. The men were looking warily at Spock, but so far none of them had gone for a weapon. He explained concisely, then added, "Sir Leech, do you examine my friend's ankle."

"A Demon?"

"Without his aid I would not have survived the storm. He knew, as I did not, where shelter could be found. He is no Demon. But even if he were, he is in pain. Your oath as a doctor requires that you give him succour." Gently, Sir James allowed Spock to sink into a sitting position.

"Jim, do not force him," Spock said. "You forget, already, the fear your people have for mine."

There was a rustle of movement among Sir James' men. Then Pavel said, "No Demon would speak like that."

Hesitantly, Surgeon McCoy reached forward. His fingers touched the swollen ankle lightly, explored cautiously. Spock flinched; McCoy's examination gained in confidence at this proof that the alien did in fact suffer pain. Finally he looked up. "Broken," he said.

Sir James wanted to continue helping his new friend but he knew that he was tiring. Even the three miles they had covered was a marathon distance under the circumstances. He nodded to two of the men. "Kyle, Scott - do you carry him first. Spock - will you come with us, or will your own people give you better care?"

Spock looked at him. "I will come with you," he said. Their gaze locked; Sir James smiled, understanding. Spock's people could undoubtedly give him better care; but this was an opportunity to let Humans see a 'Demon' at close quarters, injured, in pain, needing care. It would not be easy; but these five men who had the initiative, the willingness to come into the desert in search of him, were a beginning. They would help persuade the others...help him guard Spock from any superstitious fools in the garrison.

Human and alien stood outside the old city, looking towards the alien camp. Spock's ankle was not yet wholly mended, but he could now walk unaided. He knew, even without McCoy's warning, that it would remain weak for some months.

During the past weeks, all the Humans in the garrison had come to accept him. Sir James was quietly pleased; when they returned home, these men would have tales to tell of how the 'Demons' were little different from Men. Pavel had even gone to the alien camp, and had managed to speak to a Demon there, letting them know Spock was safe. Sir James had been aware of a closer watch on the city thereafter, but doubted that any other Human was aware of it.

Now the two stood together, knowing that time had come to part. They clasped hands firmly.

"This is not goodbye," Sir James said quietly.

"Indeed not," Spock replied. "One day we will meet again. And on that day, your people and mine will no longer be strangers, but friends."

"I will work for that," Sir James promised. "My recall has come; Secretary Baris over-reached himself and has been disgraced. I leave for home in five days. Alas that you cannot accompany me, but I feel it would be premature."

"You could be correct, Jim. But when the time is right, I will come."

Sir James watched him walk easily through the barrier around the alien camp; then he sighed, feeling suddenly lonely, and turned to begin preparations for his own departure.

ALPHA MALE by Meg Wright

McCoy watched Kirk's retreating back, deep lines furrowing his brow. He still could see no reason why Jim should suddenly ignore his own firmly established, self-imposed rule. The girl was no prettier, no more intelligent, no sexier, no more motherly, no more feminine in any way than all the other women who had passed under the Captain's appreciative eye. Admittedly she was neatly shaped, briskly efficient and friendly, but she cast out no lures, made no effort to attract, a good clean wholesome girl - and not Kirk's type at all. Maybe the Captain felt it was time he settled down - plenty of Starship Captains eventually got the urge to put down a few roots, even if only at second hand, and found the stability of a wife and family in the background gave them extra confidence in their professional life. All the same, this theory didn't fit with the way Kirk followed that darn girl about. Any new crew-member was always carefully assessed by the rest before shaking down into their own comfortable niche, but within hours of Ensign Eloise Frome's arrival on board he had seen Kirk carrying her tray for her in the rec room, a most unlikely courtesy for a Captain to accord a newly-appointed Ensign, who would be better off in the company of her peers.

He moved slowly off down the corridor, still deep in thought, and the next moment was brought up short by a pair of strong hands gripping his forearms. He blinked - focused.

"Why, Mr. Spock!" he grinned. "I didn't know you cared."

The austerity of the long face deepened. "If you must walk the corridors without looking where you are going, you must allow those of us with a more highly-developed drive for self-preservation to take the precautions you neglect."

McCoy's grin widened. "I'll never understand why a man of logic makes a speech when two words would be enough, Spock. Can't you simply say, 'you're welcome'?"

He turned and fell in beside the Vulcan, who lifted an eyebrow. "You were proceeding in the other direction, Doctor," he commented acidly, "or had you forgotten?"

"Now I'm going your way," McCoy answered cheerfully. "I want to talk to you, Spock."

After several paces, Spock said, "I am still here, Doctor."

"Well, I can see that!"

"You said you wished to speak to me," Spock reminded him patiently.

"Oh, that! Well, I do, but privately."

"Really, Doctor, you should learn to be more specific." The patience was exaggerated this time. "I have fifteen minutes I can spare you before I go on watch; we could go to your office."

Spock watched the Doctor's tapping fingers and suspected that he knew what it was McCoy was finding so hard to say.

"Have you noticed anything odd about Jim lately?" McCoy began at length.

"Specify, Doctor."

"Hmm," McCoy grunted. "That means you have but you either don't want to answer or you want to make sure I mean what you mean." He surveyed the granite face with narrowed eyes. "That girl," he said abruptly.

Spock paused briefly. "It is quite normal for the Captain to take an interest in the opposite sex, Doctor," he said slowly.

"But she is so ordinary," McCoy expostulated. "So dull, so...nothing! She

doesn't even strike me as being particularly intelligent, and that I would have said would be one essential that no girl of Jim's could be short on. Damn it, Spock, would you want to hang around a girl who's got no conversation?"

It was a measure of Spock's concern that he made no attempt to turn the question aside with a reference to Vulcan mores. "It is my belief that the Captain would find the perpetual company of an inferior mind unsatisfactory, Doctor," he began, "but I do not feel qualified to judge what other attractions the young lady has for him."

McCoy nodded. "There's nothing in his psychological profile to account for it," he said. "No hidden quirks that could possibly apply to Ensign Frome. I can only suggest that you and I keep a careful watch on the situation and see what develops. It may be that Jim has found the right woman for him, but I can't help but doubt it all the same."

Spock lifted an eyebrow. "Do you really believe that the Captain will not notice if we begin to take an interest in his personal affairs?"

McCoy grinned at him. "I hope he will. It might make him think twice about making a fool of himself!"

"Doctor, the Captain is a grown man, capable of making decisions for himself."

"Do you think I don't know that, Spock? But his behaviour is out of the usual pattern, and as Chief Medical Officer, it is my job to keep an eye open for any behaviour out of the norm. And I am asking you, as his best friend, to help me."

Spock made no attempt to refute the suggestion - he had long since abandoned the effort to maintain a stolidly Vulcan facade before the surgeon, at least where Jim was concerned. If McCoy felt there might be a problem it was only what he, with his less experienced eye, had already been thinking.

"As long as we are discreet," he conceded, "I can see no objection to your suggestion."

"Good. When was the last time you two had a game of chess?"

"Over a month ago."

"Before Ensign Frome came aboard?" McCoy looked startled. "You mean this obsession began the moment that girl first arrived?"

"As to that, I have no information, but the Captain has not sought out my company since that time."

"Well, invite him to a game this evening. Swallow your Vulcan pride and show him you miss his company." McCoy's face became gentler. "I'm not trying to take a dig at you this time, Spock, I know I'm asking you to do something damn difficult for you, but please do it, for Jim's sake!"

The shutters were well down over the lean face, but he simply nodded. "I will do what I can, Doctor."

Encountering Kirk on the way to the elevator, he fell in step beside him. Kirk gave him the half nod and smile of his usual greeting, but studying him intently, Spock felt uncertain that the usual warmth lay behind that smile. He choked back a most un-Vulcan sense of deprivation and, secure in the knowledge that a life-time's training would ensure the normality of his voice, said, "We have not had a game of chess for some time now, Jim. Would you care for a game this evening?"

"Some other time, Spock," Kirk said absently. "I've got a lot on my mind at present, and I can't spare the time."

The casual tone increased the sense of loss in the Vulcan, and, fighting his in-built need for withdrawal, he put out a tentative hand and laid it on Kirk's sleeve.

The Captain jerked back instantly, rubbing his arm as though repulsed. "Don't touch me, you...half breed alien," he snarled softly. "I've had all I'll take from you, so now leave me alone, damn you, and stop pawing me."

The face did not betray the inner shock as Spock drew back, thankful that the slowing elevator brought them to their destination. He fell into his customary place at Kirk's shoulder with only the slightest of hesitations and followed the Captain onto the bridge.

Once at his station he made the regulation checks as meticulously as usual, his Vulcan blocks surrounding the screaming, questioning Human within. The hours of routine ticked by with maddening slowness until the touch of his relief's hand on his shoulder heralded end of watch. Again there was that tiniest of hesitations as he rose to follow Kirk to the elevator, but habit was strong enough to master inward reluctance. However, since Ensign Frome's pleasantly scrubbed face greeted Kirk as the doors opened, Spock's feet paused again by Uhura's station. The doors closed, and Spock moved forward to the new car with Uhura.

The Bantu girl's eyes were watchful as the Vulcan touched the control.

"She's a nice kid," she said calmly as the lift began its journey. Unperturbed by the blank face he turned to her she added, "But rather unformed somehow."

"I have insufficient experience to be able to form a considered opinion," he managed to reply through lips that seemed strangely stiff.

"You can take it from me that she isn't his type," Uhura said softly. "The whole crew has noticed, Mr. Spock, and it's become a matter of general speculation. I thought you ought to be told."

"I see." Under those circumstances it became his duty to probe further into this strange new relationship, however much his own nature rebelled at the necessity to interfere where he was clearly no longer welcome. He stood aside to let Uhura pass. "Thank you, Lieutenant, for bringing the matter to my attention."

Uhura repressed a fleeting urge to give the ramrod figure a hard, comforting hug. So unnecessary to pretend that he wasn't alive to every move the Captain made, and yet so typical, that without the cold facade he would no longer be the man she respected so deeply. She moved down the corridor, glad to have been able to voice her worry so naturally. The situation had promised to be unbelievably embarrassing as she had pondered ways and means of raising such a subject with Spock of all people, but the whispers were becoming so wild that the First Officer clearly had to be warned of what was happening.

Uhura's worry now lessened, Spock's increased proportionately. He went back to his quarters deep in thought. His own hurt must be ignored, would have been in any case, but he must now act where his own wish would have been to stand back. But what action could be taken? His background could provide no answer and he must use the caring impulse Kirk himself had awakened to try to solve a problem of such illogic. The implications behind that brief moment in the turbolift he would not even consider yet; the good of the ship must come before his own peace of mind - and if he was honest with himself, he was not yet ready to contemplate a life without the friendship that had transformed it.

His mind ran swiftly over the Captain's present daily routine and realised that he had time to join him and the Ensign in the rec room. He rose to his feet, forcing his reluctant steps towards the door, his mind acknowledging the dichotomy within him; his inner need to resolve this situation both for the ship's and his own sake, and his equal inner shrinking from the emotionally charged circumstances. He quickened his pace.

Having collected a cup of coffee, he turned to make his way to the table Kirk shared with the young Ensign and found McCoy behind him. The Doctor grinned.

"I thought you might need your hand held," he murmured, helping himself to coffee. They approached the table together.

"Mind if we join you?" McCoy said breezily, drawing up a chair. "Long time no see, Jim. Have you been avoiding me? It isn't quite time for your check-up yet, you know!"

"I am aware of that," Kirk said stiffly, his eyes on the lean figure behind McCoy. "Do you have to bring him too?"

McCoy hid his amazement well. "We keep bumping into each other today," he said airily, putting down his coffee and motioning Spock to the space between himself and Kirk.

The Vulcan sat down, his face as impassive as always. Kirk slid his chair a little closer to the Ensign; she gave him the tiniest of smiles. McCoy studied her covertly, still unable to see any special attraction behind that amiable exterior. Was it, he wondered, simply a case of the old complaint...I can't think what he sees in her?...or was there indeed something to worry about in all this. He launched himself into idle chatter, reviewing his day with cynical humour. Ensign Frome responded to him civilly, smiling politely at his wry commentary; Kirk was patently bored and did not attempt to make conversation. He had turned himself away from Spock and watched the Ensign's face with an intensity that was as painful to McCoy as it was embarrassing. As a social occasion it was an object lesson in how not to make the party go with a swing, McCoy thought grimly. Bad enough in ordinary society, but potentially lethal within the confines of their closed environment. He threw the odd remark Spock's way, inwardly full of praise for the valiant way the naturally anti-social Vulcan responded to his mild sallies. McCoy grinned at him affectionately, and leaned towards the Ensign.

"To hear this Vulcan talk," he said confidentially, "you would think he backed my judgement all the way; instead of that, he's a worse headache to me than all the rest of the crew put together. Why, sometimes I can't even get him to come for a medical without a direct order from the Captain. Isn't that true, Jim?"

"Uh...what?" Kirk visibly pulled himself together. "I wasn't listening, Doctor. What did you say?"

"I said that this Vulcan friend of yours is the worst patient on board this ship," McCoy explained.

Kirk did look at Spock then. One comprehensive, devastating glance, before leaning towards McCoy.

"That damned Vulcan is no friend of mine, Doctor," he said savagely, not bothering to lower his voice, "and you can oblige me by keeping him out of my hair."

His chair crashed to the floor as he stood up, reaching blindly for the Ensign's hand. The room faltered into silence.

When the doors had closed behind the two of them the rec room once more broke into a hum of conversation. McCoy caught several wondering glances in their direction and searched his mind frantically for some way to normalise the situation. Spock drained his cup imperturbably and looked enquiringly at McCoy.

"More coffee, Doctor?"

"No, thanks. I've not finished this." He sipped the cooling liquid slowly. "No sense in rushing out, too," he growled quietly.

"Indeed," Spock concurred. "I will have a second cup, Doctor, and it will be as well if you share one with me. The crew has been given sufficient cause for speculation already." He took their empty cups and went to the dispenser. McCoy watched him with warm approval, prepared for once to admit that Vulcan training had its advantages. As the Vulcan returned, Scott came from the other side of the room and sat down at their table.

"The whole room heard," he said quietly. "What is going on, Leonard?"

"This isn't the place to discuss it," McCoy replied.

"Mebbe you're right," the Engineer conceded. He drew Spock into a technical discussion, and the tension in the room slowly relaxed.

They left together and McCoy led them to his office.

"We can be certain of privacy here," he said grimly. "How much have you noticed, Scotty?"

"There's been a lot of talk amongst the crew," Scott said slowly. "I've not been paying attention to gossip, but I didnae realise there was any real trouble until tonight. I thought he was just fascinated by the wee lassie."

"So did I," McCoy agreed, "and I really couldn't see any good reason for it."

"Well, no. She's a nice enough lassie, but..."

"But!" McCoy nodded. "I haven't noticed anyone else who has found her so magnetically attractive. I'd better run through her records and see what her background is."

"In that case I'll be leaving you and Mr. Spock alone, this isnae my province at all. But if you need any help, don't hesitate to call on me."

As the Engineer left them McCoy nodded his understanding and thanks and thumbed the computer switch. Spock came to his shoulder and viewed the data with him.

"Eloise Frome. Born von Braun's planet. Father Justin Frome, trader. Mother Eveena Gorlath, native of Mutorin, humanoid stock, half-breed. Entered Starfleet Academy..." He thumbed the switch again. "The rest of it seems straightforward enough, but where the hell is Mutorin? I've never heard of it."

"Nor I, Doctor."

The admission startled McCoy and he raised his eyes to the Vulcan's face. A heaven-sent opportunity to tease the Vulcan and he had to pass it up...why had he not noticed that stricken look in those dark eyes before?

"What's bothering you, Spock?" he asked sympathetically. "There's something wrong with Jim I know, but we'll track it down between us. He wouldn't have spoken about you like that if he was in his right mind."

Spock nodded slowly. What he had to say was not easy, but it must be said. "That was not the first time today that Jim has spoken so," he said with difficulty. "Doctor, did you sense revulsion in him?"

"You mean you think Jim has developed some kind of xenophobia?" McCoy was surprised.

"No, Doctor. I think the prejudice is against myself. I sense total repugnance in his attitude towards me, as though he believes..."

McCoy waited patiently for the measured voice to continue. Spock turned away, unable to meet the searching blue gaze. "Doctor, I believe Jim thinks my friendship for him is...more than friendship."

McCoy's mouth opened slowly. "You think he thinks that you... Spock, you must have some logical reason for thinking that."

"He told me to stop pawing him," Spock said shortly.

"Pawing him?" McCoy sat down abruptly. "Spock, give me the full story for heaven's sake!"

"There is little enough to tell. I acted upon your suggestion and asked him if he would care for a game of chess this evening. He refused, saying he had a lot on his mind and couldn't spare the time. I thought I should try to persuade him further and laid my hand on his sleeve."

"That hardly sounds like an attempt at seduction," McCoy said calmly. "What else did he say?"

"His reaction was quite explicit. He jerked his arm away as if it had been burned, and requested me not to touch him." Spock looked across and met McCoy's eyes. "He called me a half-breed alien, said he had had all he could take from me and told me to leave him alone and stop pawing him."

The Doctor frowned. "Spock, even if Jim did think such an unlikely thing was true, he couldn't react like that. Jim is one of the most caring people I know, and if he really thought you wanted such a relationship and he didn't, he would have dealt with the situation in such a way that didn't hurt your feelings. Besides that, Jim knows you are a Vulcan, and homosexuality is unknown among your people."

"Unknown to modern Vulcans, Doctor," Spock corrected him. "The condition is known to have existed before our modern culture supervened."

"Jim knows what time of day it is," McCoy said bluntly. "Spock, what you have told me only adds fuel to our suspicion that that girl has some sort of hold on Jim's mind. Is she telepathic?" He thumbed into the computer again, studying the girl's psychological profile. "Hmm. No more so that a good many people are, but a very slight latent ability is noted. The examining board didn't think it warranted any further investigation - well, I don't know that I agree with them." He began to get up, but Spock held out a restraining hand.

"Doctor, before you made any such investigation it would be as well if we discovered more about her background. I will see what facts the library computer can give us about the inhabitants of Mutorin." He went to the door. "I will tell you my findings in the morning, Doctor. For now, I suggest a good night's rest."

"Who's the Doctor around here?" McCoy grumbled, getting to his feet. "All right, Spock, I'll leave it with you for the moment, but don't go overdoing things yourself. With Jim in this condition, you may be needed at any time."

"I am ware of that," Spock told him soberly.

Spock reviewed the library tapes a second time. The information was sparse; little had been learned of pure-bred Mutorins since the first contact was made, for the planet had little to offer in the way of valuable mineral deposits and had expressed no desire to become members of the Federation, therefore, although their outlook was friendly enough, their desire for privacy had been respected. There was a minor trading agreement, but it had made little impact on either side. A few mixed marriages had resulted from the association, all of them Mutorin females to Human males - the only fact of any significance to their present problem.

He glanced at the chronometer and, finding it to be past midnight, left the computer section for his quarters. There was little point in disturbing McCoy now and it would be as well to secure a couple of hours' sleep before he was due on watch once more. He caught back a sigh. It was always the same when Human emotions were part of a problem, it became more tiring than the simple application of logic; trebly so when his own feelings were involved; but his friendship with Jim Kirk had brought sufficient compensations for his logical mind to prefer things as they were.

A brief flash of red caught his eye as he turned the corner to the turbolift, one of the new night-watch keepers going about their duties. He lengthened his stride. The ship was always peaceful at night, the corridors empty of the chattering crowds about their day-time duties; the Vulcan himself often chose to work throughout the night, grateful for the restful atmosphere and even more disinclined for sociability than he was during the day. With the problem at present on his mind he was totally disinclined for any trivial chat that the unknown crew-woman might feel like engaging him in. He reached the solitude of his cabin and prepared himself for sleep.

Ensign Frome breathed a sigh of relief as she watched him disappear into the lift.

As soon as his early-morning watch was over he went to McCoy's office. The surgeon greeted him sourly.

"I see your research into Mutorin hasn't achieved much," he grunted. "The place isn't even mentioned in the records." Spock's eyebrow flared and McCoy grinned wryly at him. "Human impatience, Mr. Spock. I couldn't wait for you to come off watch so I went down to the computer section to have a look for myself."

"Your technique seemed to be inadequate for even the simplest of information retrieval, Doctor. I will give you a retraining session when I have the time."

McCoy frowned. "You mean there was something on record?"

"Little enough, but there was certainly some information."

"There was nothing there this morning, Spock...and I'm not that incompetent!"

"No," Spock admitted. "The situation would bear investigation." He moved to the door.

"I'll come with you."

Spock straightened his back. "The section has been wiped," he said flatly.

"Then it must have contained something important."

"A logical deduction."

"Well, what?" McCoy danced with impatience.

Spock recounted the information he had obtained and McCoy stared at him. "But why, Spock?" he said at last. "There's nothing there we can work on."

"There is one fact of possible significance, Doctor. All the mixed marriages have been Mutorin female to Human male, which might well be accounted for by the fact that there are statistically fewer female traders."

McCoy glared at him. "Blast statistics. If that is the only fact of interest then that is the one she wanted suppressed."

"A simplistic approach, but it may be the right one."

"So we interview Ensign Frome?"

"As soon as possible."

"Jim!" The anguished cry knifed into Kirk's mind. "Jim, tell them to leave me alone. Tell McCoy and Spock to leave me alone!"

The picture in his mind of the two men - one leeringly covering his prurience beneath the veneer of his medical status and the other...the other a bestial, slaving creature whose strong hands itched to rend the delicate femininity he abhorred - brought Kirk to his feet and out of his quarters at a run.

Spock surveyed the silent Ensign with an interested eye. "Fascinating, Doctor. The telepathic ability has increased immeasurably. Her mind is blocked against me and I cannot break through without damage to us both."

"Then we'll need to use some other method to make her talk."

"Like hell you will!" The harsh voice behind them was well-nigh unrecognisable. "Leave her alone. I am the Captain of this ship, McCoy, and you will torture nobody...nobody without my personal order!"

"Who's being tortured?" McCoy asked reasonably. "She's quite unharmed, Jim. We only want to ask her a few questions."

"You'll leave her alone, Doctor, and that's an order!"

"Captain," McCoy spoke coldly. "You have no jurisdiction over medical matters, in this sickbay it's my orders that matter, and it is my duty to discover how Miss Frome has caused another crew-member's sickness."

"Nobody's sick!"

"Mentally ill, Captain, through close contact with the Ensign."

"No-one comes in contact with her, she is my responsibility...my personal care. Your conduct is unprofessional, Doctor; a man of your age licking his lips over getting a young girl on one of these couches. You disgust me!"

McCoy was outraged. "That is totally untrue, and you know it, Jim. How dare you make such a suggestion? The Ensign must be examined. If you would prefer it I will call Nurse Chapel to make the tests."

He turned aside to the intercom. Kirk, his face a mask of rage and hatred, rushed forward, one hand raised for a killing blow to the throat. In that split second Spock leaped, fingers going to his friend's neck.

McCoy gazed down at the still figure, shocked. "He was going to kill me, Spock," he whispered.

"The Captain is not himself," Spock said gently. While McCoy busied himself over the recumbent Captain, he turned to the Ensign whose face portrayed fear and anger in equal proportions. "Miss Frome, it is not our intention to hurt you, but we must know why you are influencing the Captain's behaviour in this way."

"He is fit to be my husband," she said sullenly.

"Fit to be..." Words failed the Doctor.

"Is this the way of your mother's people?"

She glared her hatred at the Vulcan. "There is nothing to be ashamed of in my mother's culture; she taught me to be proud of it and live by it. I am proud of both sides of my heritage and wished to find a husband after the way of the Mutorin. I am not ashamed to be the daughter of a half-breed." She flung the words at him defiantly.

"Why should you be?" Spock replied, unmoved. "But before you claim a husband is it not customary to discover whether the male wishes it or no?"

She lowered her eyes. "The strongest mind wins and rules. Any others could have had their chance with him."

"But there are no others of your race aboard," McCoy said patiently.

"Then I had the right to claim the highest-ranking for my own. I claimed his mind and he was mine, to protect me and make provision for me."

"Ensign!" Spock said sternly. "You have lived amongst Humans and know that this is not the way they manage such affairs."

"No. Human women must seek a man's favours and the mates of the prime specimens are often weak and silly creatures. Our method ensures that the strongest-willed women capture the minds of the most fitting males and so our race grows in strength while theirs weakens with each mis-matched pairing. The Captain has the strongest will aboard this ship and a position of power and influence. He is fit to be my husband."

"Nevertheless you will release your hold on his mind," Spock said firmly.

"You cannot make me."

"You will release him voluntarily once you understand the true strength of the Captain's will." Spock turned from her and bent over Kirk. "The Captain is

coming round. Doctor, I suggest you take Ensign Frome to another room for a while."

McCoy nodded and hustled the protesting Ensign out of the way. Spock knelt beside Kirk and pressed his fingers to his face.

Five minutes later a relieved McCoy saw them both walk in, Spock's face as undemonstrative as ever, but the rueful grin on Kirk's displayed not only his complete recovery but also his knowledge of all that had passed.

Eloise Frome took one look at his face and gave a low cry of passionate anger and loss. Kirk shook his head at her.

"You hit below the belt that first time, Miss Frome," he said gently, "and I was caught before I could duck from under, but I'll not be caught with my guard down a second time." He thumbed the intercom. "Security team to sickbay."

"Security?" McCoy was scandalised. "Is that necessary?"

"Do you want to be the next?" Kirk asked pointedly. "Behind a brig force field we can prevent her trying it on with anyone else. Spock, you go along to see there is no trouble."

The Vulcan nodded and led the girl away. Kirk gave a sigh of relief. "It's nice to be free, Bones, even though it felt marvellous at the time to seem so god-like."

"God-like?"

"Oh, I was every boyhood hero rolled into one. A very effective way of keeping your man." He grinned. "I could have conquered a black hole for that girl, Bones. I'm glad she never asked me to try!" He sobered again. "I owe you an apology, Bones."

"No, forget it." McCoy's tone was casual, wondering whether he should mention Spock.

"I've already apologised to Spock." Kirk answered his thought. "Poor devil, it must have been tough for him, but that young woman realised you two were the greatest threat to her hold on me, because she didn't poison my mind about anyone else. I'm glad she was right; I owe you both a lot!"

The door slid open to admit Christine Chapel.

"Sorry to interrupt, Doctor, but you're needed in the bio-lab if you can spare..."

Her voice trailed away as she caught an unexpected gleam in the Captain's eye as it rested appreciatively on her. Kirk saw her blush and patted her hand reassuringly.

"You're the first female face I've looked at properly in a long time," he said happily and went to the door. Over his shoulder he added, "I'm going to the bridge...slowly, so that I can look at a whole lot more on the way!"

LOVE'S PRAYER by Ann Smith

Here...in the stillness of a quiet night

Problems conquered,
Fears put to flight,

I lie at peace...

...and watch your sleeping form.

How vulnerable you look.
 The mask put aside,
 Only I know what passion
 That cool mask can hide.

You stir and snuggle closer,
 My heart aches to see,
 How can I ever tell you,
 How dear you are to me.

The dark head on my shoulder,
 Warm and tender in repose,
 A slight smile...contentment?
 I'd like to think it so.

My heart reaches out to you,
 Your gentleness and calm,
 I'd keep you here forever,
 Safe within my arm.

But the day will soon be dawning...

We'll find strength to go on,
 To face who knows what dangers,
 Going where 'no man has gone'.

So in this quiet time of peace,

I send this silent prayer,
 When tomorrow fades to yesterday,
 Please God.....
 let him be there.
